La. Gov. Jindal and Brookings Promote School Choice ‘Consensus’

Teacher Pension Problems Drain States, School Employees

By Ashley Bateman

States don’t have $390 billion they’ve promised teachers in future pensions, according to a new report by the National Council on Teacher Quality. This means taxpayers will have to backfill the difference while receiving no new services in return.

“Although policymakers can see the numbers and that they are worrisome, there’s always a 30- or 40-year plan toward solvency,” said Sandi Jacobs, NCTQ’s state policy director. Although big financial institutions make similar projections, they do so on different, more realistic assumptions, she said. The rates of return most state plans assume haven’t materialized in “many, many years,” she noted. “We have to be realistic.”

“[U.S. public pensions] have an accounting standard that is much looser than public employee pensions in other countries. If you do better accounting, the numbers are very bad.”

ANDREW BIGGS
RESIDENT SCHOLAR, AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

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Jindal, Think Tank Promote Choice ‘Consensus’

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elections, Jindal has stepped forward as a party leader and is frequently named a 2016 presidential contender.

His December Washington, DC remarks keynoted the release of a Brookings Institution index ranking more than 100 large U.S. school districts by amount of choice and competition. The state-run New Orleans Recovery School District ranked No. 1, and it was the only district to receive an A.

In 2012 Jindal led Louisiana, one of the worst-performing states academically, into a choice-oriented system based on reforms that had doubled student achievement in New Orleans in the previous five years.

National Model
Louisiana now has the nation’s largest voucher program, numerous charter school authorizers, and an innovative “course choice” program that allows students to take state-financed individual classes such as welding and Chinese for credit outside their assigned schools. Teachers unions have challenged several of these provisions in court.

“I hope what we did in Louisiana can be done across the country,” Jindal said.

Brookings education director Grover Whitehurst introduced and seconded Jindal’s bold support for giving parents the keys to their children’s education.

“Introducing choice and competition into K-12 education is a path that has not been taken—except by a few places in the country—and we think it is promising,” he said.

Dearth of Choices
The lack of choice has caused U.S. education to deteriorate, Whitehurst said, creating low high school graduation rates and mediocre academic performance compared to the rest of the world despite the highest per-pupil education spending outside Luxembourg.

He said policymakers have three choices: Ignore school performance, implement “top-down accountability” like No Child Left Behind, or take a third and optimal option.

“Think about how the rest of our economy works, and think about a system of K-12 education much like our higher education system,” he suggested. “People shop for schools, make choices, and schools prosper or fail depending on their ability to retain and attract students.”

The Brookings study notes approximately half the nation’s parents have chosen their child’s school by considering districts when buying a house, paying private tuition, or homeschooling. However, it concludes, “many more parents wish to exercise choice than are currently able to do so.”

Whitehurst envisioned a system where “schools that are unpopular wither like the restaurant where no one wants to eat.”

Competition Index
“The Education Choice and Competition Index” uses four metrics to evaluate school systems: amount of choice, availability of information, ease of choosing a school, and whether public funds follow individual students. The best systems, Whitehurst said, let families “shop to the top.”

Whitehurst identified four reasons to support school choice. First, “parents overwhelmingly want it.” Second, equity: only wealthy families currently can afford better schools. Third and fourth, “the research is clear” that competition improves school performance and prompts innovation.

Unequal Public Education
Jindal skewered the “nostalgic” view that U.S. education is fair and equal.

“It is completely dishonest to pretend today that America provides equal opportunity in education,” he said. “If you’re a low-income parent residing in an urban area in America, your child probably attends a failing school. You have no options.”

He and Whitehurst agreed choice-based education is far better for children than top-down accountability schemes popular with Republicans and Democrats alike. That model produces “cookie-cutter schools” that are at best “good enough” but not excellent, Whitehurst said.

“Why wouldn’t we give [students] the choice with their parents’ own tax dollars to pick the better school next door? These kids don’t have time to lose,” Jindal said.

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

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JINDAL ON EDUCATION: QUOTES FROM BROOKINGS EVENT

America does not provide equal opportunity in education.

Stop paying teachers on how long they have been breathing.

There’s no such thing as a quality monopoly. Let providers compete and get out of the way.

To oppose school choice is to choose an old, antiquated centralized approach that has no relevance to the modern age. To oppose school choice is to put the needs of adults and the status quo above the needs of children. To oppose school choice is to oppose equal opportunity for poor and disadvantaged children.

Equal opportunity in education made real by school choice should be a consensus issue.

Going forward, the states that are going to be successful are the states with the most educated, skilled, productive populations. Governors should have all the motivation they need to improve their education systems.

Let parents vote with their feet without having to sell their house to pay for private school.

Parents make decisions for their kids every day, and they make decisions better than bureaucrats in Baton Rouge and Washington, DC. The best advocate for a scholarship and choice program is not me, it’s a mom working two jobs asking, ‘Why is it OK for your kids to get a great education but not mine?’
Teacher Pension Problems Drain States

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According to the report, school employee pensions are “severely” underfunded, meaning states have not banked the money necessary to pay when pensions come due. Only 10 states have well-funded systems by industry standards, the report notes.

“[U.S. public pensions] have an accounting standard that is much looser than public employee pensions in other countries. If you do better accounting, the numbers are very bad,” said Andrew Biggs, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.

Teacher pensions are in trouble like other public pensions, Biggs said: Lawmakers often trade between pensions and other forms of compensation for public employees. Higher pension contributions might mean lower wages or fewer raises for teachers, he said.

Teachers Feel Trapped
A major flaw in most state systems, the report says, is basing retirement eligibility on years worked rather than age, allowing teachers to retire with full lifetime benefits as young as their early 50s.

“A mid-career person, sick of being a teacher, would be out of their minds to quit, because they’re just hitting the sweet spot,” Biggs said. “Defined pension benefits aren’t as meaningful to younger teachers, then spike benefits later.”

Such systems push even teachers who love teaching to quit in their 50s because their contribution amounts will soon outweigh their overall benefits, Biggs said. He recommends moving to an age-based system where workers are eligible for benefits only in old age.

The report found 10 states requiring teachers to wait until typical retirement ages to collect benefits saved an average of $450,000 per teacher.

Time-based pensions tied to one employer also leave teachers feeling trapped, said Rebecca Friedrichs, a kindergarten teacher in Orange County, California.

“It’s not affordable to leave, is common talk amongst teachers,” she said. “In most jobs, you get better and better and better and better at your job, and then you can find a new job and make more money. Not in teaching.”

Most systems give few benefits to younger teachers, then spike benefits 10 to 20 years in. This shortchanges excellent younger teachers and gives mediocre, older teachers reason to stay, Biggs said.

Implications for Recruitment, Quality
Friedrichs said some teachers feel “stuck” in their schools and current pensions make unhappy and insensitive teachers unwilling to move because that would trash years of contributions.

“Public-sector pensions have very important implications for attracting and retaining employees,” Biggs said. “It’s not due to funding as much as the way you accumulate benefits over your lifetime.”

Underfunded pensions shouldn’t concern teachers because states are legally required to pay as promised, Biggs said. But the problem should concern taxpayers, who are funding an antiquated, unrealistic, and expensive system that distresses good teachers and keeps more poor and mediocre ones in classrooms.

Friedrichs, who commutes an hour to work, said the only thing keeping her at her current school is the loss of benefits and pay if she transfers.

“I’m in a very bad school district right now,” Friedrichs said. “It’s very hard to work there. I’ve been miserable for about eight years. I could be hired easily in a private school, but I couldn’t afford it because my retirement would stop. If I had a 401(k), I could move and just keep paying into it.”

Calls for Systemic Reform
The report recommends making retirement plans portable so teachers retain the benefits they have earned no matter where they choose to work.

“The workforce has become much more mobile than it was 20 or 30 years ago,” Jacobs said. “You might move from public to private, from one district to another, ... across a state line—there are a lot of reasons why portability is so important.”

Since 2008, 40 states have increased employer and teacher pension contribution requirements. Many states also have recently adjusted teacher pensions by making teachers wait 10 years to vest in their plans, reducing benefits, or raising the retirement age. However, the report states, “These small adjustments are no replacement for systemic reform, and they have a real impact on teachers’ wallets.”

The report recommends states realistically assess and begin fully funding teacher retirements, instituting safeguards to prevent future pension raids. It also recommends giving teachers equal benefits, rather than giving nearly none to teachers early on and spiking benefits later.

“The financial exigencies are just becoming increasingly impossible to ignore, so hopefully we’ve given the states some recommendations they can move forward on,” Jacobs said.

“Time will tell whether they’re listening.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
Voters elected Teresa Rogers, a parent who helped pull a Parent Trigger in Adelanto, California, to the district’s school board.

That school board had opposed parents’ efforts to convert a failing school under its purview into a charter school. It took a lawsuit, but parents won. “We need to change the culture of the schools to students first, and high achievement,” Rogers told School Reform News.

The Parent Trigger is a law in seven states that allows parents to demand one of several reforms at their children’s school by signing a petition. If a majority of parents sign the petition, the school must implement the reform they requested. At Desert Trails Elementary, where Adelanto parents successfully pulled the Parent Trigger, 70 percent of sixth graders are not proficient in English or math. Because of parents’ actions, LaVerne Elementary Preparatory Academy will run the school starting in fall 2013.

Sending a Message
Rogers’ election is “a very good sign,” said Ben Boychuk, a policy advisor to The Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News. “It shows that a well-organized and really dedicated local parent union can not only successfully enact reforms through the Parent Trigger, but they can conceivably make political changes locally as well,” Boychuk said. “If you can’t beat them, join them.”

The election sent a message across the country, said education analyst RiShawn Biddle. “What happened in Adelanto is a strong message for reform, a message that makes clear if [school boards] think they’re going to be able to face down a bunch of parents, that’s not going to succeed,” Biddle said.

Power to Negotiate
School districts and schools must understand the importance of negotiating with parents, he said.

“Until recently, with the creation of Parent Trigger laws, parents have largely been disengaged … in reforming schools,” Biddle said. “Parents are just treated as afterthoughts and nuisances by school districts. … What Parent Trigger laws do is allow them to act, to have a voice and have real power in schools, and they can negotiate. They now have tools to negotiate and force districts to negotiate with them.”

Boychuk said the Desert Trails Parent Union is a “very impressive group of people,” well-organized and engaged. “I don’t know that every parent union could replicate their success—and it was a hard-won success—but they’ve certainly shown it can be done,” he said. Adelanto’s experience with the Parent Trigger indicates school boards should hear and obey parents who want changes to their children’s schools, he said.

 “[Rogers] has the kids in mind, so I think the decisions she’s going to make are going to be related to what the kids really need,” said Cynthia Ramirez, lead coordinator for the Desert Trails Parent Union. “Maybe it’s a message for more parents. The Parent Trigger law helped us out. Whatever you want to do—participating a little more, be a little more involved in the decision that [the board] is making—why not run for the board?”

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

By Johnny Kampis

In response to the December school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, more than two dozen Missouri Republicans are cosponsoring a bill that would allow teachers and administrators to carry guns into public schools if they have a concealed-weapon permit.

“They are the people that we already entrust to educate and protect our children, but we don’t give them all the tools they need,” said state Rep. Mike Kelley (R-Lamar). “This is going to give them one of the tools they’ve been missing.”

Missouri is one of several states where lawmakers are considering allowing teachers or administrators to bear concealed arms in schools as a defense against school shootings after a Connecticut gunman killed 20 children and six adults two weeks before Christmas. The other states are California, Minnesota, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, and Virginia.

Indiana already allows teachers with concealed carry permits to bring their guns to school if their district designates them as a security officer. Some Texas schools do the same. Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder (R) vetoed a bill to let teachers and doctors carry concealed firearms, objecting it did not allow school districts and hospitals to opt out.

Lawmakers, Parents Question

U.S. Sen. Roy Blunt (R-MO) also questions the idea. Although the Republican said in a conference call with reporters he is wary of passing any law that would infringe on the Second Amendment, he’s not sure arming teachers is the answer either.

“I don’t think we should rush to the conclusion that more people with guns in school is the solution to this,” he said.

Jackie Scott watched her four-year-old granddaughter Aaliyah ride on quarter-operated amusements at St. Louis Outlet Mall in December. She doesn’t agree armed educators will secure Aaliyah’s preschool.

“Maybe they should hire armed security guards,” she said.

Missouri law allows only law-enforcement officers to carry guns into a school.

High Political Rhetoric

Outside the nearby Cabela’s store—a paradise of firearms and ammunition for recreational gun users—Dallas Piper said he saw armed guards protecting Israeli students when he served in the U.S. Navy, but he said he doesn’t think Missouri teachers should carry guns.

The gun-rights advocate, who grew up hunting on a farm, doesn’t agree with Kelley’s legislation. He marveled at the political rhetoric that has followed what he called a “heinous crime.”

“I guess the squeaky wheel gets the grease,” Piper said. “In this case the heinous wheel gets the grease.”

Gun Checks, Training

Kelley’s bill isn’t the only Missouri proposal that’s sprung up after the shooting.

State Rep. Stacey Newman (D-Richmond Heights) said she plans to file legislation to require criminal background checks for people buying firearms at gun shows.

“We cannot sit idly by and wait for a similar tragedy in Missouri,” Newman said. “Doing nothing is no longer an option.”

A state Senate bill, filed the day before the massacre, would require all public schools to train employees in proper responses to dangerous situations, including simulated active shooter drills. First-graders also would be taught gun safety.

C. J. Huff, superintendent of Joplin schools, called the thought of gun safety classes for six-year-olds “weird” and said he doesn’t support putting guns in educators’ hands.

“I don’t know very many businesses in this community or in this country that would say let’s give all the employees a handgun to protect themselves because of violence in the workplace,” he told the Missouri News Horizon. He said handguns belong in the police department.

Huff said he’d rather see Missouri lawmakers focus on student mental health in hopes of preventing future tragedies.

Likely Legislative Reception

With its supermajority in the Assembly and Senate, Republican-backed gun bills could see traction in Missouri.

In recent years, Show-Me State lawmakers lowered the age requirement to obtain a concealed carry permit and passed another bill allowing themselves and their staff to carry firearms in the Capitol building.

The National Rifle Association has praised Democratic Gov. Jay Nixon for his support.

Assault Rifle Target

But Nixon said he is concerned about assault weapon availability. The .223 caliber Bushmaster AR-15 used in the Connecticut shooting is not considered an assault weapon under existing federal laws because it functions like most hunting rifles.

“The gruesome efficiency with which this horrific crime occurred gives pause to all of us as to the lethality of weapons out there,” Nixon said.

More than 2 million AR-15s were sold between 2000 and 2010, according to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. Guns and Ammo magazine says the gun is “hugely popular for recreational target shooting.”

U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) said she will file legislation in 2013 to reinstate the federal assault weapons ban that expired in 2004. U.S. Sen. Claire McCaskill of Missouri, a Democrat, said she supports such a ban.

“Claire’s a daughter of rural Missouri, so she’ll always protect the Second Amendment rights of law-abiding Americans, but she’s also a mom, and a former Jackson County prosecutor, and believes we can do better by our children,” said spokesman Drew Pustateri.

Such rhetoric worried former Navy man Piper as he watched last-minute Christmas shoppers enter Cabela’s. He’s concerned an assault rifle ban could lead to the government taking away more gun rights.

“That’s where it’s headed,” he said.

“They want to put their foot in the door.”

Johnny Kampis (johnny@missouri-watchdog.org) is a reporter for Missouri Watchdog, where an earlier version of this article appeared. Reprinted with permission.
Mississippi Gov. Bryant Promotes School Choice

By Ashley Bateman

Mississippi’s Phil Bryant is the latest Republican governor to pursue comprehensive education reforms. He recently released an agenda for expanding charter schools, introducing private school choice, holding students back if they can’t read in third grade, and improving teacher quality.

“Mississippi children are struggling,” Bryant said. “In the last legislative session, we focused on strengthening Mississippi’s business climate in order to spur job creation. This year, we must be serious about improving our education system.”

Nearly 80 percent of Mississippi’s fourth-grade students are not proficient in reading on state tests, one indicator among many putting the state at or near the bottom of education performance nationwide.

Tax-Credit Scholarships

A central part of Bryant’s plan is a tax-credit scholarship program to give students below the poverty level and attending schools the state rates D or F funding to attend any school their families choose. Bryant proposes allowing Mississippi taxpayers to deduct up to a collective $10 million in donations to nonprofits that offer these children scholarships.

“I don’t see a reason to limit [school choice] just to students in failing schools,” said Jason Bedrick, a Cato Institute policy analyst. “Even the best schools in Mississippi aren’t that great [according to] nationwide [comparisons], and worldwide they are really bad. Even if you have a great school in Mississippi, it may not be great for 100 percent of the students in that school. That’s why you want choice.”

The money would allow about 2,200 scholarships per year. In neighboring Louisiana, approximately 380,000 students are eligible for state vouchers. Mississippi has approximately half a million K-12 students.

The proposals are “better than what [Mississippi students] have now, but it’s pretty weak tea,” Bedrick said.

‘Good Place to Start’

The governor’s office views a limited program as a “good place to start,” and the $10 million cap sits between other state education tax credits, said Bryant’s spokesman, Mick Bullock.

“Mississippi has more children living in poverty than any other state,” Bullock said. “It’s essential that those most in need benefit from the opportunity scholarship.”

A state constitutional amendment enacted during a time of national anti-religious fervor bars Mississippi, like 38 other states, from funding religious-affiliated organizations. This means a voucher system in which the state sends money directly to religious schools is legally impossible, but tax-credit scholarships are not, Bedrick said.

“Scholarship tax credits have a perfect record of being constitutional wherever they are challenged,” even in states with constitutional language close to Mississippi’s, he said.

Legislators who may not support expanding charter schools or some of the governor’s other ideas still cross the aisle to support tax-credit scholarships, said Forest Thigpen, president of the Mississippi Center for Public Policy.

Charter School Paradox

States that open opportunities for charter schools should do so at the same time they expand opportunities for private school choice, Bedrick said, because otherwise charters reduce the amount of school choice available by “cannibalizing” students from private schools.

Bryant’s plan creates this “charter school paradox” because the private school choice it offers is so limited, Bedrick said.

Bullock welcomes charter schools because they could give children “yet another opportunity to succeed.”

“The governor believes competition is an innovative way of introducing new ideas to the classroom,” Bullock said. “He has seen firsthand the amazing results charter schools have on children and communities.”

Common Core Causing Confusion

English teachers nationwide are puzzling over a math problem: how to include the right percentages of “informational text” new standards demand in their classes.

In 2010, 45 states adopted the same lists detailing what kids should know in English and math at each K-12 grade. Although advocates promised uniformity would bring clarity, it has delivered confusion.

The Common Core requires elementary students to read half fiction and half nonfiction. That ratio gradually shifts until 12th grade, when students must read 70 percent nonfiction. Major U.S. and foreign outlets have reported English teachers chucking lessons on poetry and To Kill a Mockingbird for units on government regulations and Federal Reserve papers.

“With informational text, there isn’t that human connection that you get with literature. And the kids are … getting bored. I’m seeing more behavior problems in my classroom than I’ve ever seen,” Arkansas 2011 Middle School Teacher of the Year Jamie Highfill told the Washington Post.

The English standards’ main authors have repeatedly stated the percentages apply across subjects, so history and science should fulfill most of the nonfiction requirements. But nationwide Common Core tests arriving in 2014 will measure only math and English, making those teachers responsible for how students handle nonfiction.

— Joy Pullmann
By Joy Pullmann

Lawyers defending Louisiana’s vouchers will appeal their case to the state supreme court after a district judge ruled the program unconstitutional because of how the state funds it.

“The clear intent of the [state] constitution is that we fund children and not bricks,” Gov. Bobby Jindal (R) said in public comments after the event. Teachers unions sued to stop the program preferring “that all students fail together [rather] than parents take the money that is supposed to go to public education and try to get their kids educated,” he charged.

District Judge Tim Kelley ruled it unconstitutional for state or local education taxes to go to private schools. The program amounts to 0.11 percent of the state’s annual $8 billion K-12 spending.

Kids’ Futures Uncertain
Kelley’s ruling leaves the education of 5,000 voucher students uncertain. John Lacey is a single father of two voucher students, aged 7 and 9. He thinks it’s unjust for the court to take his kids from schools where they thrive and put them back in public schools that failed them.

“As a taxpayer, I should have the right to put my child in a non-failing school,” he said. “You’re going to tell me I have to leave my child in a failing school system? That’s ridiculous.”

Lacey’s children fell behind academically when they attended public schools, he said, but teachers refused to give them individual attention. He sought a school that matched his family values and offered smaller classrooms, but he couldn’t afford to pay the tuition on his own.

“I’m not going to send my child to school knowing you’re not going to teach him what he needs to learn,” he said emphatically. Lacey said he will keep his children in their choice school until the state supreme court decides the case.

Approximately 380,000 students became eligible for the program when it passed in spring 2012. It gave vouchers averaging $5,300 to students slated to attend public schools the state rated C, D, or F.

Louisiana has one of the worst public school systems in the nation, as measured by high school dropout rates and basic math and reading test scores. In fall 2012, five times as many students applied to the program as state officials expected, and twice as many applied as were accepted for the program’s first year.

“Louisiana’s teachers union would rather focus on [the funding mechanism] than focus on the hundreds of schools in the state that are failing.”

ARIF PANJU, ATTORNEY (LEFT), INSTITUTE FOR JUSTICE

Bipartisan Support
In a speech accepting a school choice award for Louisiana from the liberal-leaning Brookings Institution, Jindal emphasized the bipartisan support for school vouchers in general and Louisiana’s program in particular. Half of Louisiana’s House Democrats and a quarter of its Senate Democrats supported Jindal’s education reform laws, which included the vouchers.

“This was a bipartisan effort that led to parents picking their children’s schools this year,” Jindal said. The program has a 95 percent parent satisfaction rate and saves taxpayers an average of $3,000 per student “while providing a better education,” Jindal said. “To me, this is a win-win-win.”

A March 2012 poll showed 60 percent of Louisiana voters favored a statewide voucher system, while 30 percent opposed it.

Emphasis on Legalism
Kelley judged the case largely on legal questions rather than testimony about how the program affects families, Panju said.

“How sad that bureaucratic funding formulas and public employee unions take precedence over parents wanting to give their children the best education possible,” said Robert Enlow, president of the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

Kelley had earlier refused to grant a preliminary injunction to stop the voucher program as the lawsuit moved forward.

“We view this as strong grounds for appeal because the state of Louisiana has a host of educational options for parents that aren’t their city or parish public school,” Panju said.

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is a research fellow of The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
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.
Wisconsin Teachers Revel in Freedom from Unions

By Bruce Edward Walker

The Wisconsin legislation that led to statewide protests and Gov. Scott Walker’s recall and reelection has displayed a quieter, brighter side: It allowed teachers to exercise their freedom of association by choosing whether to join a union, another professional organization, or none of the above.

“Teachers have indicated they’re glad for this new freedom. Their union membership has declined an estimated 50 percent since Walker (R) signed Act 10 in 2011. The dramatic losses have pushed the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) to merge with an American Federation of Teachers affiliate by winter 2014. “As a professional, it is my personal responsibility to decide which organization I belong to and why,” said Tracie Happel, a Wisconsin public school teacher who joined the nonunion Association of American Educators. “I am not a robot, I am not stupid, and I can make my own decisions.”

AAE provides liability insurance, legal representation, and professional development but does not bargain or engage in political activism. Act 10 made teachers “hyper-aware of their options,” said AAE spokeswoman Alexandra Schroek.

Happel said she, like many other teachers, disagreed with her union’s political activism and found it irrelevant to her work as a teacher. WEAC uses member dues to support politicians “who do not share my beliefs, ideology, or morals,” she said, and organizations addressing remote causes such as child brides, genital mutilation, and providing water and goats to African villages.

Although those are important matters, Happel said she would rather choose what her money supports, and “they do nothing to actually help the students I teach and work with every day.”

Nationwide Decline

Schroek says declining Wisconsin union membership doesn’t surprise her. “We hear from teachers across the state searching for a nonpartisan choice that promotes positivity, not conflict and strife,” she said.

Teachers union membership declined nationwide in 2012, and both major unions expect continued losses due to new legislation and pressure on education spending from government debt and entitlements.

If the merger completes, Wisconsin will join Florida, Minnesota, Montana, and New York as a state with merged National Education Association and AFT affiliates.

More Teacher Choice

The number of teachers leaving unions “will only grow as collective bargaining agreements made before Act 10 was enacted expire,” said Mike Antonucci, director of the Education Intelligence Agency. “Without a requirement to join or pay the union, teachers will make the decision based on their individual circumstances.”

Union strength depends on exclusivity, Antonucci said, which is why unions demand the ability to bargain for all workers against no competing organizations.

Antonucci says although unions’ membership may decline in some states, they will still wield political power. “Politically, teachers unions will continue to be a force, but more on a par with associations of administrators or other education interest groups,” he said. “They will no longer dominate the agenda.”

Bruce Edward Walker was managing editor of InfoTech & Telecom News from 2010 to 2012.

Learn More

“Wisconsin Teachers Choose to Be Non-Union,” Association of American Educators: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zN1DuK2dI8


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The Heartland Institute

Washington Policy Center
Colorado Board of Ed. Hears Common Core Critics

By Ben DeGrow

 Challenges of cost, control, and quality have caused some Colorado education leaders to take a second look at the state’s adoption of national academic standards.

A pair of December 6 meetings in Denver opened discussions regarding Common Core standards more than two years after state officials adopted them. The Colorado State Board of Education contemplated revisiting its August 2010 decision, hearing from 17 local educators and national critics.

The Boston-based Pioneer Institute for Public Policy also convened a panel of Common Core critics in the afternoon at the Independence Institute’s Denver offices.

“It’s a discussion that had never occurred but needed to occur,” said state board chairman Bob Schaffer (R-Fort Collins), one of the three members who dissented in 2010. “I hope it raises some critical questions about Colorado’s commitment to Common Core.”

Raising Questions

Federal grants pushed 45 states to adopt the Common Core math and English language arts standards, which lay out what children should know in every grade.

One Common Core adoptee, Utah, formally withdrew from helping develop a set of tests related to the standards in August. Leaders in Indiana and South Carolina also have considered doing so.

Though not persuaded to step away, a pro-Common Core member of the Colorado State Board said some points raised by national critics merit further investigation.

“These folks raised some questions that I want to get answers to, especially whether the standards are really internationally benchmarked,” said Elaine Gantz-Berman (D-Denver).

Panelist Sandra Stotsky, a professor of education reform at the University of Arkansas, says her fellow panelists told the state board the Common Core would disrupt ongoing local efforts to implement the standards in classrooms.

“Why did Colorado trade in a silk purse for a sow’s ear?” Stotsky asked the think tank audience.

Disputing Costs

Michael Petrilli, executive vice president at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, contends the new English standards are of equal quality and Common Core upgrades math education for Colorado.

Petrilli also said keeping the Common Core standards would give Colorado a clearer picture of school performance, greater access to digital learning innovation, and potential savings on new textbooks and other instructional materials.

“Any state not participating in the Common Core is going to miss out on this bonanza—most of it paid for by others,” Petrilli said.

Theodor Rebarber, founder and CEO of Accountability Works, sees the equation very differently. He argued signing on to the Common Core would lead states to take on significant additional costs.

“The proponents of Common Core have tried to create an aura of inevitability,” Rebarber said. “What it really means to implement Common Core is starting to sink in.”

Steering Ahead

A change of two seats on the state board since the original adoption has caused a slight shift in sentiment against the Common Core. Yet the state board may lack the authority to withdraw Colorado from the initiative.

In May the Colorado General Assembly approved bipartisan legislation binding the state to 22 others in the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers to design and implement a new set of tests tied to the Common Core.

In the wake of the November elections, the Democratic Party controls the governor’s office and a majority in both legislative houses. Berman worried changing course would disrupt ongoing local efforts to implement the standards in classrooms.

“We would create complete havoc in school districts to tell them just to go back to the old standards,” said Berman.

But some key education leaders still want to find a way to ensure Colorado doesn’t head down a path toward greater federal control.

“I would hope the discussion inspires a new direction of autonomy and independence toward higher standards,” Schaffer said.

Ben DeGrow (ben@12i.org) is senior education policy analyst for the Independence Institute, a free-market think tank in Denver, Colorado.
By Ashley Bateman

New teachers need not take education philosophy and methods classes or major in education to enter an Indiana classroom, after a 9–2 State Board of Education vote easing teacher license requirements.

Although incoming state superintendent and union president Glenda Ritz objected to the changes, board members adopted what they call REPA (Rules for Educator Preparation and Accountability) II on December 5.

“Our local school districts need more flexibility and options,” said Stephanie Sample, an Indiana Department of Education spokeswoman. “We have an extreme shortage of teachers, especially in math and science. If we already have somebody in the classroom that a principal thinks is qualified to teach, they’re driving student growth and improvement, why would we force those individuals to spend thousands of dollars for something that looks better on paper?”

Under the new guidelines, any person with a four-year college degree and GPA of 3.0 or above can attain a teaching permit by passing an exam. Building administrators also no longer have to hold master’s degrees. Previous requirements fit the national norm: Requiring all teachers to take education school classes, and not just initially but frequently, through continuing education mandates.

Teachers can now teach subjects outside their degree concentrations by passing a “content-area exam” in any subject but elementary education, special needs, and English as a second language. The state previously required college courses or an entire degree in those fields.

The state will still require all teachers to undergo yearly evaluations, license renewals, and professional development.

A Different Breed

Teacher education has not kept pace with how K-12 education is changing, said Indianapolis school principal Byron Ernest. Teachers who enter his school from alternative programs appreciate regular evaluations and feedback, whereas teachers educated in the traditional setting view those “punitive.”

“If we’re ever going to truly reform education, we need to start at the teacher education part,” he said.

Indiana’s education leaders first began rethinking teacher licensing in 2009 after national exams rated Indiana’s teacher quality low. Samples said: “We looked at how to reduce a lot of the regulations and hoops teachers went through.”

While most people intuitively believe more credentials equal higher quality, the research has consistently disproven that connection, says Marcus Winters, a Manhattan Institute scholar and author of Teachers Matter.

“We should allow anyone to try teaching, within certain requirements,” Winters said. “Right now, the current system makes it difficult to become a teacher in the first place and then assumes you’re doing fine. We need a system that does the opposite—focusing our efforts on identifying the best teachers and keeping them in.”

Extra Opportunities for Students

The decision to hire a particular instructor with certain credentials remains with local districts, Samples said.

“Our kids will benefit from these content-area experts,” she said. “Some [districts] are already bringing a lot of nontraditional teachers into the classroom, and it’s had a lot of success, especially in the rural areas.

Rural schools have difficulty finding traditionally educated teachers able or willing to teach language or elective classes, said state board member Cari Whicker.

“I have superintendents who would tell me [they] need one period a day of Mandarin Chinese,” Whicker said. “In rural Indiana, how do you get one period a day of Mandarin Chinese? Other small school corporations have trouble finding a physics teacher for an AP Physics class one period and may not be able to hire full-time. If you can have someone outside who is willing to step in and teach, that’s a way to give opportunities to those students.”

Options for Urban Schools

Ernest, an alternative-route Ph.D., supports the looser regulations. His school, Emmerich Manual High, was taken over by the state in 2011 because of poor performance.

“When you’re turning around a school that has failed for seven years, when you’re turning around a culture, the big advantage is these teachers, even though they’re young, come in with a lot of experiences,” Ernest said.

It has been difficult for Ernest to replace most of his school’s staff, he said, and alternative certifications “have given us more options.”

The changes take effect in summer 2013.

Wisconsin Ed. Dept.: $20,000 for ‘Cultural Sensitivity’ Documents, Please

Wisconsin’s Department of Public Instruction wants to charge taxpayers twice for the same thing: a big sum to indoctrinate teachers in “cultural sensitivity” and another $19,969 to tell how much that cost.

Related training in Portland, Oregon cost taxpayers $526,901 and taught educators mention of common foods such as peanut butter and jelly sandwiches is the “subtle language of racism.” The company running the multi-year seminars also claims rewarding hard work penalizes minorities.

In November, the Education Action Group, a Michigan-based watchdog, filed a public information request for all documents detailing Wisconsin’s four-year relationship with San Francisco-based Pacific Educational Group. In December the department’s lawyer wrote back, estimating that fulfilling the request would generate 104,275 pages and take 173 hours.

“It’s hard to say you are following the spirit of the law for government transparency when you send a taxpayer a $19,000-plus bill with a straight face,” said EAG’s CEO, Kyle Olson. He said EAG plans to file narrower information requests.

Milwaukee has independently pursued a similar philosophy, requiring teacher applicants to pass a “cultural sensitivity test,” the Wisconsin-based MacIver Institute reported in December. The test and related training downplays “basic education” and promotes teaching where “almost anything goes,” the report stated.

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Legislator Network Stays Neutral on Common Core

By Joy Pullmann

The board of a conservative legislator network has decided it will remain neutral on Common Core standards rather than endorse model legislation encouraging states to drop the nationwide K-12 requirements for student learning.

“The American Legislative Exchange Council will move on to different education topics, including the Parent Trigger and teacher evaluations, said Michael Bowman, ALEC’s policy and strategy director.

“We already have a resolution that talks about barring any federal intrusion into state education affairs, so [we] felt pretty adequately covered,” said ALEC board chairman and Indiana state Rep. David Frizzell (R-Indianapolis).

The decision, made a week before Thanksgiving, followed months of “emotional and contentious” discussion among legislator and private-sector members, Bowman said, over whether the standards illegally nationalize curriculum and institute low expectations or represent a necessary improvement for most states.

Lenghthy Debates

In summer 2012, ALEC’s public- and private-sector task forces independently approved model legislation opposing the standards after debates including Indiana Superintendent Tony Bennett and former Texas Superintendent Robert Scott. The board sent it back, recommending edits to moderate the language.

Both task forces approved the new version. The board voted against it. ALEC would not release the vote breakdown, but it was “not unanimous,” Bowman said.

This means ALEC will remain neutral on the Common Core but continue opposing all federal efforts to mandate curriculum, he said.

The board “went to great lengths” to ensure a fair decision-making process, allowing both sides to present their cases for months, said Jonathan Butcher, the Goldwater Institute’s education director. Butcher helped draft the model legislation.

Pros and Cons

“A lot of folks in the pro-national standards camp said this is a done deal; all these states have signed on,” Butcher said. “If so, why did it take a year and a half for a body of state representatives that gathers several times a year to parse through all this evidence and the best they could come up with is that they’re neutral on it?”

Many ALEC members concluded the Common Core did not represent federal intrusion, Bowman said.

“If Common Core is what it says it is, it will never be content curriculum, in which case there is no reason to oppose it,” he said.

A majority of states adopted the Common Core within two months of their release, and 44 had adopted them within six months. If the Common Core is state-led, each will implement it differently, Butcher said.

“There is ample evidence these standards are not the best we could provide for every child in the United States,” he said. “We want parents to be the ones who decide what is best for their kids. We want schools to be the ones to decide how best to operate and for teachers to control their classrooms. The further away you get from the classroom when you decide what kids should be learning, the less freedom you have.”

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

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Entry Deadline: March 20, 2013

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Best U.S. School Districts Trail Global Competition

By Mary Petrides Tillotson

W

RICHMOND, Virgina reporter, now writes from Front Royal, Virginia.

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director of education studies at the Pacific Research Institute.

“Even though America is an econom-
ic superpower now, that doesn’t mean that in the future we’re going to keep that stature,” he said.

Suburban parents shouldn’t sit comfortable believing their children are getting a good education based on statewide or even national comparisons, Greene said.

The mental and academic ability of a country’s students directly correlates with its future prosperity, says Eric Hanushek, a Stanford University econom-
ist who has conducted well-regarded research on education and economics.

“We are becoming much more an integrated, international world where people compete across national bound-
daries all the time. We’re in an age where skills and human capital are what determine who’s going to do well,” he said.

Implications for Reform

Greene refrained from recommending specific policies to address the deficien-
cies his work revealed, as many reform ideas are divisive. His main goal is for Americans to acknowledge the problem so districts, policymakers, and reform-
ers can work toward a solution.

School districts “almost universal-
y” ignore international comparisons, Hanushek said, because “the news isn’t very good for them, and they don’t like to have bad news.”

Hanushek suggests districts and law-
makers should work to improve teacher quality because it has a major effect on student achievement.

“Effective school systems don’t let bad teachers stay in the classroom for long,” he said, noting education sys-
tems in other countries. “They might find ways to improve the teachers. They might find ways to move them to other jobs, but one way or another, they keep from having bad teachers in the class-
room for very long.”

Union Obstacles

Union contracts prevent thousands of schools from removing poor and medi-
ocre teachers, Hanushek said.

“[Districts are] constrained by teachers’ contracts and state laws and numerous other things from making decisions on the teachers in their distri-
but, that’s what they need to do,” he noted.

Students using school choice pro-
grams, such as vouchers, do better aca-
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Students using school choice pro-
Study: Media Ignored Big 2012 Education News

By Joy Pullmann

The national news media missed a number of big education stories in 2012, according to an empirical news analysis by the Hoover Institution’s education task force.

The five biggest news stories the media failed to cover thoroughly, the study found, were teacher pension deficits, Common Core education standards, international student achievement comparisons, online learning, and Louisiana’s landmark education reforms.

“We thought the less-covered ones were serious deficiencies on the part of the media,” said Bill Evers, a task force member.

Empirical News Analysis

The task force and research assistants used a computer program to analyze 21,514 education-related news stories from 43 of the nation’s largest media outlets, such as USA Today, Atlantic Monthly, National Review, Huffington Post, Fox News Special Report, and CBS Evening News. Koret Task Force on K-12 Education members judged whether certain central topics received an appropriate amount of coverage from October 15, 2011 to October 15, 2012.

“We thought we ought to do something more empirical and less subjective, because we are scholars and everyone has an opinion,” Evers said.

The task force also identified five education topics the media covered in proportion to their importance in 2012: charter schools, teachers unions, special education, pre-kindergarten, and No Child Left Behind.

‘Fraught with Consequences’

“The issues the media neglected are fraught with consequences for American education for years to come, and the public deserves to know more about them,” Evers said.

For example, states’ underfunding of teacher pensions means taxpayers will have to pay at least an estimated $325 billion for past overspending rather than future improvements to teacher pay and classroom instruction.

Approximately 80 percent of the public report they have heard little or nothing about the Common Core standards, though nearly all states are implementing the dramatic changes to what children will learn in every grade and how states test students and teachers.

The report calls it an “astonishing level of public ignorance of a policy that already commands huge attention.”

‘Deeply Rooted Problem’

“The behavior seems to continue,” said Rich Jarc, JIE’s executive director.

In the institute’s 2009 survey, educators ranked as less dishonest than salespeople and journalists, but 11 percent admitted they think occasional lying or cheating in order to succeed is “necessary.”

With six-hour days and summers off, teaching is a well-paid, attractive profession, and some unqualified people strive to attain and maintain credentials to remain in it, said Herbert Walberg, a Hoover Institution fellow and advisor to The Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News.

“Cheating within schools is a deeply rooted problem,” Walberg said. “With No Child Left Behind state-level examinations, there’s cheating going on—a lot of it. A lot of schools aren’t up to par and considered failing, and there’s more and more and more pressure on educators to do well.”

Low Bar

People who have a teaching degree usually have little problem passing the Praxis test, Ewing said.

“If a teacher certificate is an easy test for anyone who has completed high school but has nothing to do with college-level ability or scores,” said Sandra Stotsky, an education professor at the University of Arkansas, “then people who hire and then fire an individual who has taken the exam, and then fire that individual, are similarly culpable.”

Said Rich Jarc, JIE’s executive director: “The test is considered failing, and there’s more and more pressure on educators to do well.”

By Ashley Bateman

Indictments are mounting as federal prosecutors uncover more cases of fraud and conspiracy in a teacher-cheating ring spread across three southern states.

Teachers allegedly paid impersonators to take certification tests in their place using fake identification at Praxis testing centers, then entered or remained in the classroom.

Fourteen people have been indicted as part of the teacher certification cheating conspiracy the U.S. Department of Justice says was led by Clarence Mumford Sr. of Tennessee.

The racket lasted 15 years in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee, DOJ officials said. Four other persons have pleaded guilty to related crimes, including identification and Social Security fraud.

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Georgia Groups Sue to Stop Voter-Approved Charter Plan

By Christine Ries

A coalition of advocacy groups has sued Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal (R) to overturn a constitutional amendment 59 percent of voters approved in November.

Constitutional Amendment One allows the General Assembly to authorize charter schools that have been denied by local school districts.

Organizations including the Georgia School Boards Association and Georgia School Superintendents Association had earlier created an advocacy group that lined up funding, speakers, debates, and media contributions to oppose the measure.

They argued school choice and new charter schools would drain resources from regular school district systems and hurt children “left behind” as programs including band and athletics are cut or eliminated. Some of those groups brought the lawsuit, arguing voters did not know what they were voting for.

The ballot question read, “Shall the Constitution of Georgia be amended to allow state or local approval of public charter schools upon the request of local communities?”

Voters rejected the charter school opposition’s arguments, based on evidence that shows when charter public schools are created, regular public schools improve. Their student achievement scores increase, and they often work more effectively on smaller budgets. Having failed with voters, the opposition decided to try the courts.

Building a vibrant charter school environment, however, provides relatively more money per pupil for traditional public schools, so band teachers can purchase more clarinets and their football coaches can buy more equipment.

Better Outcomes, Lower Costs

Developing vibrant public charter schools also is good for taxpayers, according to the findings in my study, “Do Charter Schools Hurt Students in Traditional District-Run Schools,” published by the Georgia Institute of Technology. In Georgia, the public charter schools that were authorized by a previous state commission deliver significantly higher educational outcomes at 15 to 40 percent below the costs of regular public schools.

The report was written to explore the assumption that Amendment One meant robbing Peter to pay Paul.

In this study, my coauthors and I estimated the loss of revenue for each transferring child to the potential reduction in system costs, to determine which districts would realize a financial loss or gain when one student left the district school system to enroll in a charter.

More for 129 of 180 Districts

Of Georgia’s 180 school districts, 129 would gain financially for each child transferring to a charter, according to the report. For those districts, the possible reduction in costs for each withdrawal is greater than the reduction in state revenues. Gaining districts could add an average of $1,218 to their budget for each child lost to charters. In the highest-gain case, the Atlanta Public School District could gain $6,507 for each child transferring to a charter.

The 129 districts that would potentially realize financial gains enroll nearly 1.4 million, or 89 percent, of Georgia’s public school students. These are primarily the largest districts and, therefore, the most likely environment for charter schools to emerge.

As expected, the remaining 51 districts are primarily the smallest in enrollment and number of schools. They enroll approximately 164,000, or 3,221 students per district, and usually have five or fewer schools. Because economic viability requires that charter schools attract 800 to 1,000 students, they are unlikely to develop in districts with small school-aged populations. So it is highly unlikely these smaller districts would lose money overall.

The study’s big finding was that charter schools would not, on net, drain resources from regular public schools. Instead, losing more costs than revenues means most public school officials should support authorizing charter schools rather than oppose them.

Christine Ries (christine.ries@gmail.com) is professor of economics at the Georgia Institute of Technology and author of “Do Charter Schools Hurt Students in Traditional District-Run Schools?”

LEARN MORE

“So Charter Schools Hurt Students in Traditional District-Run Schools?” Christine Ries:
Whistle-Stop Tour to Highlight School Choice Week

By Joy Pullmann

The nation’s biggest school choice party will grow eight times bigger this year with thousands of events initiated and attended by tens of thousands of students, parents, teachers, and community leaders, said Andrew Campanella, president of National School Choice Week.

“You can have a lot of whitepapers and research and polls and studies done, and they are very important, but if you don’t have regular people involved in this fight—having their voices heard at public events, rallies, town hall meetings—you’ll never have change,” he said.

During National School Choice Week (NSCW), January 27 to February 2, grassroots organizers will celebrate choice at some 3,500 events they designed. Schools that normally require uniforms are allowing students to choose their clothing. Others are holding pizza parties and balloon launches. Miami activists are planning a festival. Groups in various states are holding rallies, screening movies, and hosting speakers.

High-Profile Support

Campanella expects 7,500 attendees at the kickoff in Phoenix, Arizona.

The week has grown exponentially particularly because the organization has partnered with more schools, he said.

In 2012, media figures such as comedian Bill Cosby and actor Sacha Baron Cohen expressed their support for NSCW, as did 28 state legislatures and governors. The organization expects similar public acknowledgments this year, partly because it’s a “big tent” event open to “anybody who believes in school choice as a civil rights and civil liberties issue, and communicate our message about school choice just as [similar messages were communicated] in struggles in the past?”

In-Person Communication

“Today [presidential candidates] fly 35,000 feet in the air, and you don’t have any contact with them,” observed Bob Withers, author of The President Travels by Train. Fry called it “the book on presidential rail travel.”

“When they speak on television it’s usually off a teleprompter, but when they came through on a campaign train and stopped in your town you could see the man personally and hear what he had to say,” Withers continued. “Sometimes he’d make a mistake and you’d know he was human instead of a machine spouting off talking points.”

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

LEARN MORE
To find a National School Choice Week event near you, visit www.schoolchoiceweek.com/events
Public education has taken many forms over the past 300 years.

Early in our history, public education referred to formal instruction in public settings outside the home. As public teaching became increasingly common in the latter half of the eighteenth century, communities began creating tuition-free schools that operated independently, much like today’s charter schools.

Religious schools receiving public funds to educate the poor were an important part of this evolving public education system in the early nineteenth century. According to Pulitzer Prize-winning education historian Lawrence A. Cremin, in 1813 most New Yorkers saw publicly funded religious schools “as public or common schools” (p.164).

Anti-Catholic Bigotry
The birth of public education as we know it today occurred during the 1840s and ’50s. Catholic immigrants were flooding into urban areas, and community leaders sought an effective and efficient way to assimilate these immigrants into a Protestant-dominat- ed republic. Free public schools open to all whites and teaching Protestant values were the obvious solution.

Massachusetts lawmakers passed the country’s first mandatory school attendance law in 1852. The state was being inundated by newly arriving Catholics. Over the next 50 years, every state eventually followed Massachusetts’s lead, with Mississippi being the last to mandate school attendance, in 1918.

In an attempt to eliminate all Catholic education, Oregon passed a Ku Klux Klan-supported initiative in 1922 requiring all children to attend Protestant-controlled public schools, but the U.S. Supreme Court ruled this initiative unconstitutional in 1925. This ruling gave parents the ultimate authority—within the constraints of mandatory attendance laws—to determine how their children are educated.

Industrializing Education
The industrial expansion in the late 1800s led to more changes in public education. As urban immigration caused city populations to explode, public school managers embraced the promised efficiencies of assembly lines, standardization, mass production, and command-and-control management. This industrialization of public schooling accelerated in the early twentieth century and remains the dominant organizational model in public education.

But another transformation is now occurring. Public education is transitioning from a one-size-fits-all model to a system of customized teaching and learning. As this shift unfolds, what constitutes public education is again changing.

Redefining Public Education
Customized teaching and learning have so blurred the lines between public, private, and homeschooling, it is now most practical to define public education as education that satisfies each state’s mandatory school attendance law. We require students to learn, to achieve a public purpose. Whatever satisfies this purpose should be considered public education, regardless of how that education is funded, delivered, or governed.

Using criteria such as publicly funded, publicly accountable, or publicly governed to define public education no longer works in an environment where students flow in and out of various learning options each day or even minute. In my home state of Florida, for example, it’s common for students to take courses from multiple public and private providers simultaneously, and for home and private-school students to receive public funding for some or all of their daily instruction.

My younger son spent a semester as a homeschooled student taking a full course load for free at St. Petersburg College. As a homeschooled student he also was able to take free courses from district, charter, and virtual schools. Private school students in Florida have these same opportunities.

Private Schools More Accountable
Some argue that stronger accountability is what distinguishes public from private education, but Florida’s state testing requirements are more rigorous for some publicly funded private school students than for students in district schools.

Florida’s district students must take state assessments in third and tenth grades, and may take the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test or a state-approved alternative (i.e., the Stanford 10 or portfolio assessments in third grade, and the SAT and ACT tests in tenth grade).

In the Florida tax-credit scholarship program I help run, state law requires scholarship students attending private schools to take tests in grades three through ten, and they may take the FCAT or a state-approved alternative—most take the Stanford 10. Thus Florida actually requires more annual assessments of scholarship students than students in district schools.

Distinctions to Clarify
 clarifying the distinctions between public schools, publicly funded education, and public education, and aligning what constitutes public education to the purposes underlying school attendance laws, should enhance our dialogue about how best to improve, manage, and regulate public education in the future.

For example, should all students who are meeting a state’s attendance law be required to master the same learning standards and take the same tests? Should all learning options—public, private, and home—be subject to the same regulations and accountability system? How should we fund a system in which students take courses from multiple providers in multiple states? How do we manage and share student records in such a diverse and dispersed system? And how do we provide parents with the information they need to make the best schooling choices for their children?

As customization increasingly replaces the industrial assembly line as public education’s preferred organizational model, we’ll need to redefine public education accordingly. And if history is any guide, this redefinition will be one of many over the next 300 years.

Doug Tuthill (dtuthill@stepupforstudents.org) is a former professor, classroom teacher, and union president. He is now president of Step Up For Students, a tax-credit scholarship nonprofit in Florida. The Cremin quote comes from Cremin’s book, American Education: The National Experience, 1783-1876.
School Reform, the Texas Way

By Herbert J. Walberg

Different increases in wealth among countries are strongly linked to student achievement. But in the most recent international achievement survey, U.S. students ranked 27th in mathematics and 21st in science. Seventy percent of our eighth graders can’t read proficiently, and most never catch up. About 1.2 million students drop out of high school each year, and 44 percent of dropouts younger than 24 years old are jobless.

Yet the United States has the highest per-student spending in the world, except for Luxembourg. With poor performance and high spending, American public schools are grossly inefficient. They are also grossly unfair, because poor families are typically confined to the worst schools in big cities, and their children drop out at higher rates than their peers.

Compounding the problem are teachers unions. Their members generally work about 30 hours per week for only nine months, in contrast to the typical American workweek of 40 hours for a minimum of 11 months. Most public school teachers have tenure and are rarely held accountable for performance by administrators or school boards. In fact, state and local boards have failed mightily in their responsibility to represent the public’s, parents’, and students’ best interests.

Public School Monopoly

Most public schools are local monopolies because parents must send their children to the school their school board has set. The best student performance is concentrated in private schools, both independent and parochial, and, more recently, in charter schools, which are publicly funded but privately governed. Since private schools compete for students, they must serve them well or face declining enrollments and possible closure.

On average, private school students achieve more than those in nearby public schools, private schools are more attractive to parents, and tuition typically averages half of the annual $15,000 public schools spend per student.

Most American private schools must charge tuition, which limits poor and middle-income parents from sending their children to them, even though many want to do so. Privately funded vouchers or scholarships for private school attendance are greatly oversubscribed, usually limited to poor families, and relatively rare.

Charter School Influences

Most states and cities limit the number of public charter schools, despite the independently run schools’ achievement success and attractiveness to parents. Typical charter schools must turn away students. Only about 3 percent of all publicly funded students attend charters.

Parents who get their children into charter schools are less likely to campaign for more charter schools and for reform of the entire school system. Since charter schools require no tuition, they reduce demand for private schools, and many private schools have subsequently closed.

Poor parents are less likely to know about the complex process of getting spots for their children in charter schools, which contributes further to inequality in the public school system. Many poor and middle-income parents cannot afford to move to suburbs where, typically, the schools are better than in urban centers.

Charter schools are further limited or threatened by unproductive federal, state, and local regulations. Conflicting regulations and curriculum requirementscurtail successful charter organizations from expanding the number of their campuses beyond a single city or state.

The Texas Solution

Given the continuing failure and high and rising costs of public K-12 education, how might more poor and middle-income families receive the school choice they greatly desire? The Savings Grant program before the Texas legislature might provide the best model. It is scheduled for consideration in 2013, and it overcomes most of the past failings of privatizing schools to offer school choice to substantially more families.

Texas’s governor and lieutenant governor have urged substantive reforms, and legislative leaders have endorsed the Savings Grant program for several reasons. The legislation would reimburse parents for the tuition costs of the private schools they choose or 60 percent of the Texas average per-pupil public school expenditure, whichever amount is smaller. Thus, each participating student would save the state at least 40 percent of the usual public school per-student cost.

The plan consists of only five sentences and is so simple that the state controller’s office, rather than the Texas Education Agency, would administer it.

The Texas plan will give parents substantially more choice than charter, voucher, and tax-credit plans. Unlike voucher and charter plans, enrollment isn’t capped, there are no family poverty requirements, and no new regulations on participating schools. Oversubscribed schools could grow. Unlike tax-credit plans, participation is not limited to people who pay state income taxes; every child receives the same grant, and no bureaucratic agencies or regulations stand between parents and the schools they choose. For these reasons, it appears that the Texas plan may be the last, best hope for American K-12 education.

The failures and high costs of American public schools have remained a threat since publication of A Nation at Risk in 1983. Subsequent reforms and rising expenditures have accomplished little in three decades. The future of our children and this nation requires a bold new vision for school reform. The Texas Savings Grant embodies that vision.

Herbert J. Walberg (hwalberg@heartland.org) is a distinguished visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution. He chairs the Beck Foundation and The Heartland Institute. This article is reprinted with permission from the Hoover Institution’s journal, Defining Ideas.

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