Arkansans Push for More School Choice

By Kellie Slappey

School choice proponents hope a new Arkansas charter school will preface even more options for families once lawmakers reconvene in 2015.

“There is a growing interest in making sure that [Arkansas] students have the best educational opportunities available,” said Virginia Walden Ford, an Arkansas native and founding member of the Black Alliance for Educational Options. Walden Ford now works with the Arkansas Parent Network and has been traveling the state to discuss school choice with families.

In conjunction with rising interest, Ford noted, “There is an effort to establish additional charter schools.”

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Obama Presses for Race-Based Vouchers

Continued from page 1

state from issuing vouchers without federal permission, then an amendment to that motion said—without withdrawing the previous request—it simply wanted to make sure the state filed appropriate data and otherwise complied with federal law in issuing vouchers.

The department attempted to bar families from intervening in the case, and on November 18 it abandoned its request to block the program, switching to its regulatory request.

Jindal and 30 U.S. Senators consistently have opposed the department’s actions.

Opposing Opportunity for Minorities

The Justice Department’s argument is based on false information, say lawyers on the case.

“We have by far the stronger argument. This was a very strange motion that the DOJ brought,” said Jon Riches, attorney for the Goldwater Institute, which tried to intervene on behalf of Louisiana families. It will instead file as friend of the court.

Goldwater attorneys argue the original desegregation orders don’t apply to the voucher program. Even if they did, results of a study by the University of Arkansas and the state’s own report show the voucher program increases racial integration.

The program is open only to low-income families assigned to average-to-failing schools, and more than 90 percent of the program’s beneficiaries are minorities.

“A lot of civil rights activists would roll in their grave if they knew they had the liberal left opposing a for-minority choice of where to send their kids,” said state Rep. Kirk Talbot (R-River Ridge), who cosponsored 2012 legislation that expanded the voucher program.

The Louisiana Association of Educators supports the DOJ’s actions but is not directly involved in the case, said Deborah Meaux, president of Louisiana’s National Education Association affiliate.

“The state has a duty to inform the Department of Justice, at least the judges in each of the districts, as to the racial mixture of kids so that the judges can make sure that the balances that they’ve set up for each district are not disturbed,” Meaux said.

Working for Families

Crain-Dillon’s family is biracial, and she said she’s disappointed the DOJ has brought race into the conversation.

“We’re in 2013; we’re supposed to be moving forward and moving away from those times, and if that’s so important, … why not just start shifting kids and make it 50-50?” she said. “People try and hinder these kids trying to better themselves, and their parents trying to better their kids.”

She’s been pleased with the private Christian school her ninth-grade daughter, Taylor, and seventh-grade son, Titus, attend with vouchers. The kids are challenged more, and she receives emails from teachers about school projects the students are working on. She even got a text message informing her of a power outage at the school.

At the public school her other daughter attends, she has waited more than a week for a response from a teacher about an issue she feels is serious.

“Just having that in the back of your head, ‘I may not go here next year.’ It’s kind of a downer,” Crain-Dillon said.

Fix Public Schools

Meaux blames Jindal and state Superintendent John White for any failings of Louisiana schools.

“There’s too much emphasis at the state level on the vouchers, and not enough emphasis on public school education,” she said.

Louisiana families benefit from vouchers, said state Rep. Alan Seabaugh (R-Caddo Parish), who cosponsored the voucher expansion.

“I have a hard time finding a problem with [taking] a student who’s in a failing school and giving him an opportunity to go somewhere else. It simply boils down to that,” he said.

“There’s no legal, ethical, or moral justification for the federal government’s position,” he said.

When the legislature passed the voucher bill, Seabaugh expected local school boards to challenge it, because state money follows the students into a private school. Similar challenges have been filed against school choice programs in Arizona, Alabama, and several other states.

“I did not see the federal government lawsuit coming, because it’s hard to predict stupidity,” Seabaugh said.

“When we give out food stamps, for example, to low-income people we don’t say, ‘Here’s your food stamp. You can go to the grocery store that’s nearest you, and that’s it. If they don’t have fresh fruit, you don’t get fresh fruit. If they have criminal activity in the parking lot, too bad,” Talbot said. “For some reason, that’s what we did with education.”

Mary Tillotson (mary.c.tillotson@gmail.com) is an education reporter for Watchdog.org, from which this article is reprinted with permission.
Activists Hope to Take Colorado Strategy Nationwide

By Bailey Pritchett

At the end of a hard-fought and expensive election, four conservative school board incumbents retained their majority in Douglas County, Colorado in November 2013.

Local and national political groups now hope to use their victory as a template nationwide.

Douglas County, one of the five most-affluent counties in Colorado, with a median family income of more than $100,000, spearheaded conservative reforms through four board members elected in 2009.

In 2011 the school board dropped its union contract and proposed the nation’s first district-run voucher program. The program is on hold until the state supreme court rules on its legality. That same year, Douglas County adopted a merit pay system that tied teacher compensation to job performance measured by student test scores and job evaluations.

Americans for Prosperity (AFP), Jeb Bush, Michael Bloomberg, the American Federation for Teachers, and FreedomWorks were among the many organizations and individuals contributing to the hundreds of thousands of dollars raised for the county’s 2013 school board race after national unions made the board a target.

“[Unions] don’t want this model to survive. Douglas County is unlike any school board in the country. They were a target for resistance,” said Ben DeGrow, a senior education policy analyst with the Independence Institute in Colorado. “Douglas County is unlike any school board in the country. They were a target for resistance.”

“Ripple Effect”

Colorado’s Thompson Valley and Jefferson County also elected conservative school board candidates. DeGrow sensed a movement for conservative school reform in the state.

“The school board [in Douglas County] is pursuing an ambitious reform agenda,” he said. “It [is having a] ripple effect. They are pursuing reform on behalf of students and understand the stakes involved.”

During the Douglas County campaign, Americans for Prosperity ran television ads on local cable networks and organized volunteers to walk door to door to inform their neighbors about their “It Works” campaign. AFP-Colorado Director Dustin Zvonek estimates he and his volunteers knocked on more than 3,500 doors.

In a statement, the grassroots organization said, “residents need to remain vigilant about continued reform; otherwise the County will reverse ground and return control of the district to hidebound teacher unions.”

Going Local: An Effective Strategy

Campaigns for the school board seats were less than civil this time. The opposition “made incumbents look bad,” DeGrow said. Social media was the largest muckraking venue, such as an edited video clip that made it appear candidate Meghann Silverthorn called her constituents “uninformed soccer moms who really don’t know the issues.”

Zvonek said if Douglas County’s school board were discredited and voted out, his state would lose ground to reformers who fought hard to establish. If the only truly courageous school district lost to the teachers unions, other counties in the state wouldn’t follow their lead.

Zvonek says AFP is planning further state-based reform efforts. “In the 2014 and 2015 elections, we’re looking at school districts that could be the next Douglas County,” Zvonek said. “But we don’t advocate for candidates—we value free-market reforms and talk about how they improve school districts.”


Legal Nonprofit to Fight Federal Grab at Louisiana Vouchers

By Mary C. Tillotson

The Goldwater Institute has appealed a court ruling that would let the federal government regulate a Louisiana scholarship program that allows low-income students to attend private schools if their local public schools are failing.

“The Justice Department continues to threaten educational opportunities for children who need them desperately,” Clint Bolick, the institute’s vice president, said in a statement. The nonprofit organization often litigates on behalf of vouchers.

The U.S. Justice Department in August filed a motion in a decades-old court case to stop Louisiana’s program because it allegedly impedes desegregation.

The drama unfolded over the next few months: Goldwater filed to intervene on behalf of affected parents and families but its intervention was blocked, and the institute filed as a “friend of the court” instead.

More than 90 percent of the students served by the voucher program are minorities.

Two studies show the program did not increase segregation.

In November 2013 the judge ruled the federal department could oversee the program, but not the kind of oversight it had requested. Louisiana and federal representatives plan to meet soon to agree on federal involvement.

Mary Petrides Tillotson (mary.c.tillotson@gmail.com) is an education reporter for Watchdog.org.
North Carolina sixth-grader Zoe Morris says the new standardized tests in her Chapel Hill middle school are wrong, and she wants out.

Zoe and her father, Charlie, began researching Common Core national standards after he realized “teachers were teaching from scripts,” Charlie said, and Zoe began to register frustration in school.

“Kids would ask questions in class and the teachers would say, ‘I can’t answer that—it isn’t part of the curriculum,’” Zoe said.

Deciding she needed to spotlight this change and support her teachers, Zoe opted not to take the new state tests, which contain elements of Common Core.

Common Core defines what children must know in K–12 math and English for 45 states. Because it feeds into tighter sanctions and new teacher evaluations, parents have been pulling their kids from tests nationwide.

Test or Repeat a Grade

Charlie notified the district Zoe would refuse the test several weeks before it was scheduled for her school. Confusion soon ensued over district testing policy. Initially, administrators said Zoe could attend school and not take the test.

Once she arrived at school on testing day, the principal told Zoe to take the test or leave, Charlie said. The district lawyer later told Charlie that Zoe had to take the test or jeopardize her ability to move up to seventh grade.

“The district doesn’t have a choice but to comply with North Carolina Department of Instruction (NCDI) policies,” said Jeffrey Nash, a Chapel Hill-Carrborough City Schools spokesman.

NCDI policy states a school does not have to test students who are absent, but if an untested student returns within 10 days, he or she must take a makeup test. This gets “sticky,” Nash said, because students must attend a certain number of calendar days or be held back a grade.

Zoe ultimately decided to face the testing computer but not enter any answers.

Options for Parents

No federal law requires students to submit to standardized tests, said Robert Schaeffer, public education director for the nonprofit organization Fair Test.

The No Child Left Behind law requires schools to test 95 percent of students, and states must use the results, in part, to evaluate the school. Schools that do not show adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years face penalties, including losing federal funds.

“When faced with the possibility of sanctions, state education departments and districts often employ their own consequence regimes,” Schaeffer said.

“Parents who are fed up with over-testing in schools” have several options, Schaeffer said, including encouraging school boards and legislatures to adopt resolutions to reduce testing. Parents and teachers lobbied the Texas legislature to cut high-stakes testing by two-thirds.

For their part, Charlie and Zoe have begun the Blue Hat Movement as a vehicle for parents and teachers to register their concerns about testing. They also have helped coordinate national testing opt-out days.

Jenni White is cofounder of Restore Oklahoma Public Education and a former public school science teacher.
Proposed Constitutional Amendment Would Secure Parent Rights

By Kathlyn Shirley

Rep. Mark Meadows of North Carolina has proposed a bill to amend the U.S. Constitution to guarantee parents have the supreme right of educating, caring for, and otherwise directing the upbringing of their children.

House Joint Resolution 50, currently cosponsored by 65 members of Congress, states parents have the “fundamental right” to choose the form of education they wish for their children, including public, private, religious, or home schools.

“This amendment to our Constitution would ensure that these decisions are made not by faceless bureaucrats but by parents who love their children and know them best,” said Meadows (R-NC) in a statement. Similar bills in each of the past four congressional sessions have become known as “parental rights initiatives.” The 2012–13 bill had 85 cosponsors.

Parent rights have come under “very serious attacks by every level of government,” said Heidi Holan, the Illinois state coordinator for ParentalRights.org, which is leading the amendment effort. Common Core requirements, for example, could be challenged on a constitutional basis if the amendment is ratified, she said.

The U.S. Senate this year will reconsider a United Nations treaty on disabilities that would give primary rights and responsibility for all children to government officials. International treaties are as much the “law of the land” as the U.S. Constitution, and they trump all state and federal laws.

“Most people are surprised when they recognize how often government officials infringe upon this right,” Holan said.

Natural Rights and Duties

In 1923 the U.S. Supreme Court decreed, “It is the natural duty of the parent to give his children education suitable to their station in life.” In decades since, however, government actions have restricted this “natural duty,” says Michael Ramey, director of communications and research for ParentalRights.org.

For example, Washington State law allowed any third party to petition for child visitation rights even if the parents objected, until the Supreme Court overturned the law in 2000. ParentalRights.org wants to place language from Supreme Court precedent directly into the Constitution.

“There is simply no other option in law that can simultaneously protect the states from a ratified treaty and correct a decision of the Supreme Court,” Ramey said. The father of four says he works “to preserve what freedoms we have left, for my children and for my children’s children.”

Passing a constitutional amendment requires congressional approval by a two-thirds majority in each chamber, then ratification by three-quarters of the states.

Kathlyn Shirley writes from Washington, DC.

Arkansans Push for More School Choice

Continued from page 1

Parents’ interest in school choice led to the Northwest Arkansas Classical Academy in Bentonville. The K–8 academy opened its doors in fall 2013.

Some Bentonville parents wanted an alternative to local public schools and gathered signatures in November 2012 to make their case to the Arkansas State Board of Education. The board unanimously approved the open-enrollment charter. The school will add a grade each year until it reaches K–12. The school provides students a classical liberal arts education.

Parents have driven the creation and continued operation of the school, although it is run by career educators. The school recognizes a key element of educational success is having strong parental involvement, which it enforces by requiring parent volunteer hours and attendance at parent-teacher meetings.

Parental involvement is one of the biggest indicators of children’s likely school success. The National Education Association says parent involvement gives children a better chance of succeeding and staying in school regardless of the family’s income or background.

From Charters to Full Choice

The Arkansas Department of Education recently approved another charter school, which will open in west Little Rock. The new school is another initiative taken by local parents, who presented their petition to the charter board with more than 300 signatures.

The charter school movement in Arkansas has begun to set the stage for even broader school choice within the state, Ford said.

When asked about a school choice movement in Arkansas, the Arkansas Policy Foundation’s executive director, Greg Kaza, pointed to a recent report demonstrating the policy environment in his state has shifted dramatically to favor school choice.

In 2012, Republicans won control of the state Senate and House for the first time since the Reconstruction era, creating a legislative environment open to expanding school choice in the state. Lawmakers already had expanded charter schools four times since 1999.

Arkansas state Rep. Randy Alexander (R-Fayetteville) proposed a bill in 2013 to start a voucher program in the state. Ford says she thinks the bill will come back up in the next legislative session, which begins in 2015. “Parents and legislators will be receptive to looking at this proposal for Arkansas,” she predicted.

Until then, Ford continues to travel the state to help make expanded school choice a reality, and parents continue seeking better schools for their children.

Kellie Slappey is a government relations intern for The Heartland Institute.
Kansas Common Core Opponents Look to 2014

By Jenni White

Although frustrated by a three-vote defeat in 2013 of a bill to reconsider Common Core national education standards or related tests, former Kansas Board of Education member Walt Chappell is resolute: "House Bill 2289 [to repeal Common Core] is still alive."

The Common Core opponent expects a repeal bill to be reintroduced in 2014. In the interim, Chappell, president of Educational Management Consultants, says a "groundswell of activity from teachers and parents" is necessary to make that bill law. He plans to spread the word about Common Core and assist parents and teachers in outreach to their communities.

"We need to give them a voice," Chappell said.

Twelve Kansas legislators abstained from voting on the bill, which went down 55–58. It would have prohibited the state board of education from adopting national science standards and assigned a committee to study Common Core’s academic quality and implementation costs.

Common Core is a list of what children must learn in K–12 math and English, and it will be paired with national tests in 2014–15. Forty-five states traded their state standards for Common Core in 2010. As it has rolled out in schools, parents nationwide have protested, arguing the program reduces local input, is untested and of poor quality, and involves unknown costs.

"Wild West" Education

Kansas Education Commissioner Diane DeBacker told the legislature K–12 standards are necessary to prevent Kansas from becoming a "Wild West" of education. DeBacker said the Lawrence Journal-World she thinks people opposing Common Core are driven more by new, controversial, and related science standards rather than the initial math and English mandates. The Kansas Board of Education adopted national science standards in June. They promote alarmist global warming and lack important academic content, according to the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

DeBacker said repealing Common Core would hurt school districts that have converted their curriculum and the legislature would invite a legal challenge by interfering with the board of education’s constitutional authority over public schools.

Newly elected state Rep. John Bradford (R-Lansing), a House Education Committee member, introduced HB 2289.

"Of those that voted against the bill, most didn’t pay attention to the volume of calls from parents," he said. He chalks up the narrow defeat of HB 2289 to lawmakers who "didn’t want to cross lines 75 miles from the state capitol, lives 75 miles from the state capitol, a March column by conservative commentator Michelle Malkin prompted her to visit.

"I couldn’t let go of the fact that I wouldn’t have control over my kids’ education. I thought about how individual they are—I don’t see my kids fitting into a standard that doesn’t appreciate who they are," George said.

Getting Involved

George says she and other parents who have begun speaking out against Common Core implementation in Kansas are being marginalized by Common Core proponents.

"Parents know what’s best for their children," she said. She and friend Vanessa Everhart organized a Common Core potluck picnic to tell friends about Common Core. As they wait for the legislature to confront the issue again, the two moms refuse to sit idle. They plan to continue using social media to inform parents and will organize parent attendance at state school board meetings to keep members apprised of their concerns, George said.

Another Gold-Standard Study Shows Preschool Ineffective

By Joy Pullmann

Initial results from a high-quality study of Tennessee’s government preschool program show its participants scored lower on cognitive tests than peers who did not attend the program.

On social skills, preschool participants were statistically no different from non-preschool peers and were ranked worse on four of seven outcomes, including behavior problems and feelings about school.

The study, which started in 2009 and will continue, is the first large-scale, randomized research conducted on a present-day government preschool program. Its findings agree with other high-quality research on government preschool, including federal evaluations of Head Start.

“I see these findings as devastating for advocates of the expansion of state pre-k programs,” wrote Russ Whitehurst, director of Brookings Institution education studies, on Brookings’ blog. “Maybe we should figure out how to deliver effective programs before the federal government funds preschool for all."

Most research showing positive outcomes from government preschool is not high-quality or derives from expensive boutique programs that are 40 or more years old and never have been replicated.

The study is being conducted by researchers at Vanderbilt University. It examined 3,000 children from low-income families.

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

"When the SAT and ACT [college entrance exams] have been changed to comply with Common Core, it will put [homeschoolers and parochial schools] at a severe disadvantage nationwide."

JOHN BRADFORD
STATE REPRESENTATIVE
LANSING, KANSAS

Jenni White is cofounder of Restore Oklahoma Public Education and a former public school science teacher.

PODCAST INFO

James Shuls: Common Core Ruined
Learning Latin in the ‘Hood

By Ashley Bateman

Boys’ Latin Charter School sits in west Philadelphia, but despite the high-crime locale, it doesn’t employ metal detectors and security guards. It relies, instead, on strong educator-student relationships, high expectations, and a parent-backed commitment to student success. And all of its students learn Latin.

Most students enter the high school poorly educated, but school staff builds up the students, said Elaine Wells, one of the school’s parent leaders. Seventy-eight percent of the school’s 460 students qualify for free or reduced-price federal lunch, a proxy for low family income.

During his enrollment, Wells’ son was diagnosed with a sleep disorder. Boys’ Latin faculty and staff immediately responded.

“They allowed him to take the strenuous classes early in the morning when he was most awake,” Wells said. “As the day went on and he felt himself dragging, he was given one-on-one time with the teachers.”

Teachers and administrators are available to students around the clock via personal email addresses and phone numbers, said Latin teacher and department chair Sarah Flounders.

“I have friends who are teachers at other schools who think it’s crazy, the amount that I communicate with my students,” Flounders said. “I love that we are so open. It helps them know that there are more people on their side.”

In a city with some of the worst dropout and student achievement rates in the nation, 99 percent of Boys’ Latin students were accepted to colleges in 2012.

Challenging Students

The 2013 valedictorian, Miles Burton, credits his teachers with his development as a scholar and person.

“They challenge us,” Burton said. “If they understand that you are a level ahead, they’ll give you more difficult work.”

Burton entered Pomona College in fall 2013, having graduated with academic scholarships, AP credits, and a 4.29 GPA on a four-point scale. Teachers have promised him they’re available for him while he’s in college, too.

Because it is a public charter school, Boys’ Latin is free to students and must accept any male student who applies. If there are not enough seats available to accommodate all the students who apply, the school must hold a lottery.

Parent Involvement

The school aims to engage students’ families, said Noah Tennant, its principal. Before students enroll, parents must visit the school and agree to do so twice a month during the school year.

“We talk about expectations, what a school day looks like, difficulty, what they need to be doing, … if college is part of their vision,” he said.

The school hosts numerous workshops and required seminars for students and parents to discuss resumes, finances, and getting into college.

No Test Prep Focus

The challenging, personal setting is a dream environment, Flounders said.

“Our excellent teachers value that they are trusted and given some latitude to take risks … and implement their curriculum in a way that is meaningful to their students,” Tennant said.

The school’s teacher evaluation, which its teachers helped create, focuses on student engagement and critical thinking.

“These are more important than standardized test scores,” Tennant said. “We thought if we were only working toward test preparation, [it was] the lowest common denominator.”

An intrinsically challenging education produces the best results for young people, and studying Latin improves verbal, writing, and even science test scores, Tennant said. In 2012, 53 percent of Boys’ Latin students ranked proficient in reading and 43 percent in math on state tests. For surrounding Philadelphia high schools, those figures are 43 and 36 percent, respectively.

Developing a Scholarly Culture

Students partake in summer reading and college-bound programs, and they travel for Latin competitions. Students have competed at Penn State, Holy Cross, and Yale University.

“Latin has provided our guys with a really unique opportunity [of] social learning and vision establishment through these tournaments,” Tennant said. “Our guys are on these college campuses with like-minded students, and they start to envision themselves as academics and scholars.”

College enrollment is more important to staff than college acceptance, he said. Boys’ Latin students currently have an 81 percent college matriculation rate.

“There’s not another school in the commonwealth that has eight out of ten black males completing college,” Tennant said. “We’re proud of that number, but not satisfied with it, either.”

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

Georgia charter schools have started their own first-in-the-nation teacher certification program that is already inspiring charters in other states.

Teacher certification is a chokepoint for recruiting talented potential teachers, because it often requires years of preparation and thousands of dollars for applicants before they get a teaching job. Until the Georgia Teacher Academy for Preparation and Pedagogy (GaTAPP) was established, charter school teachers actually had to leave their jobs to student-teach in a traditional public school.

Studies show students of certified teachers learn no more than those of non-certified teachers. Charter schools, by definition, attempt to innovate beyond typical public school practices. So Georgia charter schools began their own state-sanctioned alternative certification route so they could hire and train teachers their own way without breaking state certification requirements.

GaTAPP “is quickly being seen as a model for other charter support organizations across the country,” said Lisa Grover, senior director of state advocacy for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

To date, GaTAPP has graduated two cohorts totaling 59 teachers. The program is recruiting for 2014.

**How It Works**

GaTAPP teachers have to work in charter schools to enter the certification process. Prospective students must first have a bachelor’s degree or pass the state teacher certification test, then get hired by a charter school. They then earn their certification while working in the school.

The training involves online lectures and assignments, in-person workshops, and classroom videos. The process can take one to three years, and it costs probationary teachers $4,000. The Georgia Charter Schools Association (GCSA) reimburses many teachers $1,000 of that cost.

“Each teacher has an Individualized Induction Plan to meet the needs specific to the teacher based on their professional needs, as well as adhering to the mission and vision of the charter school to ensure innovation and educational reform,” said Juli Sergi, GCSA’s director of certification. “Each teacher has a candidate support team comprised of a school-based administrator and mentor, as well as a GCSA program director and program supervisor to support the teacher as they transition through the program.”

**I feel [the Georgia Teacher Academy for Preparation and Pedagogy] prepares you well for the educational field. ... GaTAPP is a great program that gives you the flexibility, support, and academic knowledge a teacher needs.”**

VICTOR MARTINEZ, EIGHTH-GRADE SCIENCE TEACHER, DEKALB PATH ACADEMY

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**Georgia Charters Create Alternative Teacher Pipeline**

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Parent Opposition Slims Colo. Student Data Collection

By Evelyn B. Stacey

After months of parent protests, Colorado’s Department of Education ended its contract with controversial technology organization inBloom in November, shortly after Jefferson County, Colorado’s school board cut ties with it for the same reason by a 7–1 vote.

This makes New York the sole remaining state with a relationship with inBloom, of an initial nine. New York is holding hearings to reconsider education policies that include inBloom, also prompted by a wave of parent and teacher protests.

Jefferson County Superintendent Cynthia Stevenson, who signed on to the program in early 2013, resigned, effective June 30, 2014, after her board’s vote.

“InBloom is safe and secure and cost-effective,” she said. “Teachers participated in focus groups and were supportive. That said, parents have concerns that were honored by JeffCo.”

InBloom is a nonprofit organization sponsored by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. It offers states and school districts a way to consolidate their student data—including Social Security numbers, discipline records, student hobbies, teachers’ opinions about students, and more—into one place.

Parents’ apprehension toward data collection is leaving many districts and states baffled on how to meet federal requirements while protecting personal information from hackers, unauthorized bureaucrats, and sale to marketing companies.

Sunny Flynn, a parent activist whose daughter attends Jefferson County schools, says data collection “must always be weighed against the costs and risks. InBloom is not the answer.”

Data Access Expanded

InBloom lets school employees see all of a student’s information on one online dashboard. What has parents in an uproar is that access to the data does not stop there.

In 2012 the Obama administration rewrote the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) through regulations allowing public schools to transfer students’ personally identifiable information to third parties without parent knowledge or consent. That gives numerous individuals quick access to students’ personal information.

When a school signs up with inBloom, inBloom stores student records online. Then, another vendor receives the data to arrange in a user-friendly format. This distributes sensitive student information to third parties without parent consent.

“You have to realize the overall context of electronic data collection and student privacy within public education to understand the concern with inBloom. ... This data is extremely powerful, predictive, and personal.”

SUNNY FLYNN
PARENT ACTIVIST
JEFFERSON COUNTY, COLORADO

Few Complete Free Online Classes

By Joy Pullmann

Mid breathless media reports that free online university classes will dramatically change education, a new study finds few who enroll complete or even attend the classes.

Of approximately one million people who enrolled in at least one of 16 Coursera “massive open online courses,” or MOOCs, on average only 4 percent completed a course. Only half viewed at least one lecture video from their course.

Such results have made MOOC leader Sebastian Thrun, who quit teaching at Stanford University to start the MOOC platform Udacity, rethink his hopes for reaching the world through low-cost online education. He’s turning to training workers through business partnerships.

The 16 classes analyzed in the University of Pennsylvania study varied in subject, assignment difficulty and type, and instructional time. Subjects ranged from single-variable calculus to first aid to ancient mythology. There was no statistically significant increase in completion rates by instruction type or support offered, such as live online chat and course length. Six percent of enrollees completed courses with lower workloads, versus about 2.5 percent who completed courses with higher workloads.

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is a research fellow of The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
Charter School Puts ‘Kids Outside, in Nature’

By Ashley Bateman

Imagine a school where children can sit outside to read or play an instrument under trees. That’s the outdoor classroom at Evergreen Community Charter School (ECCS) in Asheville, North Carolina. The school boasts an extensive list of accolades. In 2009, its charter was extended for a full decade, an unusual length of time, demonstrating strong student performance. It was one of 78 schools to win the U.S. Department of Education’s Green Ribbon Award in 2012. Students wash their dishes after lunch and bring their own utensils from home. A nature trail encircles the campus, which has rain gardens and a monarch butterfly migration way-station.

Eleanor Ashton was among a group of parents and teachers who, 15 years ago, wanted something more than what the local school system had to offer.

“My kids were in the city school system and at the time … the trend seemed to be to keep them sitting at their desk and not having them outside or doing physical activity,” Ashton said. “A big part of my reason [for founding Evergreen] was this outdoor experience. We wanted our kids outside, in nature.”

More than 180 schools across the country share a similar structure and teaching philosophy.

Expeditionary Learning

Expeditionary Learning Schools such as ECCS structure their curriculum through organized expeditions, where students may collect and test water samples from local rivers or produce a movie.

“I came across expeditionary learning,” Ashton said. “It’s a school design model which seemed to be in line with the way we were teaching and the way we wanted to teach. Once we bought into expeditionary learning and had their school designers come out and work with our teachers, we really started to formulate our focus on environmental education.”

Experiences outside the classroom are key to student learning in the classroom. They make students “much more attached” to what they’re learning, said Mike Sule, an Evergreen sixth-grade teacher.

Mother Beth Rhatigan says the school has taught her children invaluable life lessons.

“Evergreen’s experiential learning, through fieldwork, group projects, doing rather than reading about, is at a level far above the local traditional schools,” Rhatigan said. “Throughout their time at Evergreen [students] have opportunities to challenge themselves physically, emotionally, and academically via an incredible adventure and PE program, crew program, and engaging academics.”

All eighth-graders attend a wilderness camp. In eighth grade, Rhatigan’s daughter also traveled to Cambodia with teachers and classmates for spring break.

“This experience opened her to travel, a love of learning new languages, and a deeper understanding of other cultures that has shaped her high school years thus far and her plans for the future,” Rhatigan said.

‘Creative License’ for Teachers

Evergreen teachers differentiate instruction, applying the lessons and curriculum requirements in different ways to suit different children and classes, Sule said.

“I have a creative license,” Sule said. “While I need to meet the state standards and my students need to score well on the tests, the administration expects me to come up with dynamic lesson plans and units that meet the needs of the learners in my classroom.”

Evergreen teachers and administrators have been accessible and responsive, Rhatigan said.

“There was a time when our youngest daughter was feeling overwhelmed with her homework, and her teachers not only met with us but really heard us and worked with us to come up with a plan for our daughter that fit her needs,” she remembered. It is also typical for middle-school teachers to follow up on their students throughout high school, she said.

Federal Regulations Load States with Education Employees

By Joy Pullmann

State departments of education employ an average of 142 employees per million state residents, according to a Heritage Foundation analysis.

The report fingers growing federal regulations for a massive increase in education bureaucrats: Since the 1950s, K–12 enrollment has increased by 96 percent but the number of non-teaching staff has grown by 702 percent.

Washington, DC is the most bureaucrat-heavy jurisdiction, with 768 district employees per million residents. Montana is the second-most-laden state, with 444 state education employees per million residents. Texas is the least bureaucrat-heavy state, at 30 per million residents.

The analysis notes federal education spending and mandates have increased vastly in the past several decades, yet student achievement has remained mediocre.

“State departments of education have staff to manage the hundreds of hoops and federal regulations requiring them to demonstrate compliance with federal programs and mandates,” said Lindsey Burke, a Heritage Foundation scholar and the report’s author.

Through policies such as the A-PLUS Act, which would replace No Child Left Behind, states should be allowed to opt out of federal education mandates, she said, “increasing the likelihood that education spending actually makes its way to the classroom instead of getting lost in the bureaucratic ether.”

Joy Pullmann ([pullmann@heartland.org](mailto:pullmann@heartland.org)) is a research fellow of The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.

Teaching the Teachers

Expeditionary learning designers and the school’s own leadership provide extensive teacher training.

“I’ve gone through hours and hours of professional development for close to ten years now,” Sule said.

After years of outside trainers coming in, now older staff at Evergreen mentor newer teachers.

“I feel like I’ve been a teacher, that my administrators also see me as a student, and we’ve been given consistent professional development experiences that are authentic and worthwhile and meaningful,” Sule said.

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
Bill Threatens Private Schools’ Religious Liberties

By Loren Heal

The U.S. Senate has passed and the House will consider a bill that may force private and religious schools to hire people whose sexual conduct violates the organizations’ beliefs.

The Employment Non-Discrimination Act of 2013 (ENDA) forbids employers to “fail or refuse to hire or to discharge any individual … because of such individual’s actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity.” Similar laws in New York and Maryland prohibited employers from firing cross-dressing employees who made customers uncomfortable.

“The Becket Fund is concerned about any law that does not provide robust religious liberty protections where they are warranted,” said Emily Hardman, a spokeswoman for the public interest law firm. “The limited exemptions for certain religious organizations that we have seen in the ENDA draft under consideration are manifestly inadequate.”

Narrow Exemption

The bill contains an exemption for some religious nonprofit organizations. The need for such an exemption shows the bill restricts religious liberty, said Sha-ree Langenstein, a lawyer and Eagle Forum’s chairman for religious liberty.

“Constitutional laws need not contain specific protections for individuals or private entities to ensure the free exercise of religion or conscience,” she said. “If a law requires such language, that law has already crossed the threshold into unconstitutionality.”

The exemption also ignores profit-making organizations, such as schools, preschools, day cares, and day camps, “which seek to conduct their business in accordance with moral or religious principles, such as a Bible publisher or a Christian radio network,” noted Peter Sprigg, a senior fellow at the Family Research Council.

He continued, “Sexual orientation’ and ‘gender identity’ are largely behavioral categories, and employers should be free to determine what behavior is or is not appropriate for an employee.”

Confusion about Labels

Because sexual orientation is considered to be determined by each individual subjectively, not on the basis of objective factors such as biology or criteria within the law, it’s impossible for people to know how the law will be applied, Langenstein said.

“So-called ‘nondiscrimination’ laws granting protected-class status on the basis of sexual orientation have been epic failures at the state level,” she said. “Each case of so-called discrimination must be ultimately determined one by one in the courts. ENDA would protect no one other than trial attorneys seeking to line their pockets.”

Specific personnel decisions should not be controlled by government, Sprigg said.

“Employers have the right to decide for themselves what qualities or characteristics they seek in an employee,” he said. “Government should step in only in exceptional cases. Race is one of those obvious exceptions, but race is a protected category because it is inborn, involuntary, immutable, innocuous, and in the Constitution.”

“People speak of this as a ‘civil rights bill,’” said Sprigg, “but the ‘right’ in question is the right to sue your employer for an employment grievance. It is likely that in a number of cases, employees who are fired for actual misconduct will … charge that the real reason was ‘discrimination,’ thus subjecting the employer to lengthy and expensive litigation.”

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By Mary C. Tillotson

Two major school districts are employing “sex apps” and sites to help kids access contraception and testing for sexually transmitted diseases and share STD test results with potential partners, all while bypassing parents.

In New York City and Los Angeles, students are reminded they don’t need their parents’ consent to receive such services. In New York, providers are not required to inform parents their children are receiving these services.

Teens as young as 13 can download Hula (formerly qpid.me), a Web app that encourages STD testing and allows users to share their results with potential partners. Los Angeles United School District (LAUSD) made the app available in fall 2013 to health teachers, who teach the district’s 200,000 seventh- through 12th grade students once in middle and once in high school.

The New York City Health Department is sponsoring NYC Teen, a Web page that helps teens find services such as free morning-after pills or abortion counseling at Planned Parenthood without parental input.

“The question of undermining parental rights and parental authority is a serious one in relationship to this website and app,” said Peter Sprigg, a senior fellow for policy studies at the Family Research Council. “One of the most effective ways of enhancing the health of young people would be to encourage better communication about their health between young people and their parents. This seems to undermine that, rather than advancing it.”

A New York City spokesperson promised a return call by deadline four times over the course of a week but did not follow through. Thomas Waldman, a LAUSD spokesman, said the district would no longer discuss Hula/qpid.me.

‘Everybody Deserves to Have Sex’

The NYC Teen website has information about STDs, contraception, and the difficulties of teen pregnancy and motherhood. Its downloadable app, Teens in NYC Protection+, helps teens find STD testing and treatment, counseling, gay and transgender clinics, abortion, and a variety of birth control options.

It does not appear to have information on abortion alternatives such as pregnancy centers, maternity homes, or adoption agencies.

Although Hula is not part of LAUSD health curriculum, many health teachers in the district have been sharing it with students, and some schools display the app’s posters, said Ramin Bastani, qpid.me’s founder and CEO. The app is free.

“Everybody deserves to have sex. That includes people living with HIV/AIDS,” the app’s Web site states.

When teens are tested for STDs, they can have their results sent to their Hula account, making it easier for them to exchange information with potential partners. The app also includes a user-friendly map of STD testing sites across the country.

Many other school districts have expressed interest in the app, Bastani said. Sprigg says teachers shouldn’t make it easier for children to have sex.

“When a person is … on the verge of engaging in sexual relations, they’re probably not exercising their most rational processes, not weighing the pros and cons, not remembering what they’re taught in class,” he said. “It’s naive and unrealistic to expect that amount of rational cost/benefit analysis on the part of those teens in that situation.”

Testing Doesn’t End Risk

Teens who share negative STD test results before hooking up are still at risk for STDs. To account for this false sense of security—sexual activity since the last test, infections that can’t be tested for or don’t show up on tests—Hula tells users to wear condoms and practice safe sex.

That isn’t enough, said Scott Phelps, executive director of the Abstinence and Marriage Education Partnership.

Contraception is designed to prevent pregnancy, not STDs. In addition, spermicide, which is found on most condoms, has been shown to increase a person’s risk of contracting HIV, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Even in comprehensive sex ed programs, teens do not learn this, Phelps said.

Phelps and Sprigg favor teaching teens to abstain from all sexual activity until marriage, the safest and healthiest way to prevent pregnancy and STDs.

Abstinence Redefined

Comprehensive sex ed curricula may teach abstinence, but not adequately, Sprigg and Phelps said.

Most programs present abstinence as another birth control option—“don’t have sex this weekend if you don’t want to get pregnant this weekend”—and some encourage students to come up with their own definition of abstinence, Phelps said.

Most sex ed curricula briefly mention abstinence, “and the rest of the recommendation of abstinence and become sexually active,” Sprigg said. “We have some concern of that becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

Parents Left Out

Most parents want their children taught to delay sex until marriage or close to marriage, research from The Heritage Foundation reports.

“Beginning at age 13 now, the young people are given a lot of privacy with respect to their health care,” Sprigg said. “Parents are expected to pay for it and not be informed about it, and I think that’s a serious problem.”

Phelps and Sprigg said pretending sex is only physical is inaccurate and harmful.

“It’s mental, it’s emotional, it’s financial, it’s social, it’s psychological,” Phelps said.

Teens are better off waiting, Sprigg said.

“An app like this is not sufficient to deal with the complex social and emotional realities [of sex],” he said. “I’m not convinced that adolescents are prepared to deal with that reality.”

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‘Visual’ ‘Real-World’ Learning Prompts High Achievement

By Ashley Bateman

Although only two years old, Great Valley Academy in Manteca, California has garnered so much attention that traditional school districts are contracting to implement the charter school’s visual learning model.

High student test scores, hands-on business experience, and above-average physical activity are all trademarks of the school, as well as a merit-pay system for teachers and an open-door policy for parents.

Founder Eldon Rosenow applied years of child development research to create a visual learning model.

“Kids are coming to school with fewer skills at the same time the state is demanding higher performance. It’s a perfect storm,” Rosenow said. “There is really a lack of intelligence development and a mistiming of academic demand with brain development.”

‘Every Child a Gifted Learner’

Aft er age six-and-a-half, a child’s developing brain is geared toward visual learning, Rosenow said. So teachers at GVA aim to develop that ability.

“I try to incorporate visual games, so [students] are using their eyes to learn,” said Crystal Tanaka, who will teach third grade in fall 2013 at GVA as part of a three-year loop of following her students through grades.

“What if we can create better students to go along with better teachers?” Rosenow asked.

The school includes in its classrooms dyslexic, autistic, and hyperactive children, all of whom benefit from the visual focus. Regular optometric exams allow the school to recognize visual deficiencies early.

“When you start training intelligence and the skills that gifted kids use, all of a sudden every child becomes a gifted learner,” Rosenow said.

No Test Prep Focus

Unlike many schools, Great Valley does not focus on test prep.

“We’re really committed to putting kids first in that regard and in instruction that is meaningful, and that test results will come as a byproduct,” said principal Russell Howell.

In its first year, the school’s Academic Performance Index was 800, considered the long-term performance target for California public schools. The maximum API is 1,000.

“We’re all about intrinsic motivators, but we’re also all about real-world experience,” Howell said. “Each student has a job in the classroom.”

The students earn school “dollars” for their assigned tasks, which they can use on “market days.”

“One time a month a class will be selling, and another day students will be buying,” Howell said. “So students create and develop their own products, establish services, create games. ... They learn from experience, not from a worksheet, so ideas of supply and demand and pricing point become very concrete lessons.”

Student-Focused, Parent Partnering

Putting kids first and partnering with parents create a culture of security and love that breeds successful students, Howell said.

“Too many times [schools] are trying to throw one blanket solution on too many kids, one instructional approach, and it’s not realistic,” he said.

Valerie Ford’s fourth-grade child struggled academically until this year at Great Valley, when he took off.

“It was an amazing thing to watch my son,” Ford said. “Even when he was struggling and behind, he had such a good support system. He never felt stupid, he never felt frustrated, he just kept pushing on with the support of amazing teachers and an amazing principal.”

“Both our girls’ teachers will communicate with us via e-mail or in person any time there is a concern, update, or even something they want to praise our girls for,” said GVA parent Jeff Threet.

“Both teachers are phenomenal at responding to any text sent, no matter the topic. This type of open communication is priceless to us.”

Ford teaches sign language at GVA.

“Being a big part of your child’s education is a huge blessing in itself,” Ford said. “Knowing you can drop in any time, that’s a big deal. It’s a fun, thrilling place.”

Feds Struggle to Produce Timely, Relevant Education Research

By Joy Pullmann

The U.S. Department of Education needs to improve the speed, transparency, and relevance of its research, a federal review has found.

The federal Institute of Education Sciences (IES) does not, for example, publicly report on the performance of its regional laboratories, which consume a large portion of its budget, says the Government Accountability Office (GAO) report. Similarly, its evaluation of federal Race to the Top grants, which disposed of $4.35 billion, is slated to arrive after grant-recipient states have spent nearly all of that money.

In addition, IES cannot review federal education programs, many of which continue with little or no review—seven of 11 teacher quality programs, for example, have not been examined in more than ten years.

In 2013, IES’s budget was approximately $600 million. Its mission is to fund and distribute education research.

GAO also dinged IES for taking too long to peer-review education research and not sending research to policymakers who would benefit from the information. IES’s peer-review process took an average of 117 days in 2011, 175 days in 2012, and 150 days in 2013.

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Quality Teachers

The greatest determinant of school success is teacher quality, Howell noted, and “seniority alone does not define an excellent teacher.” GVA teachers develop their own professional growth plans and salaries are partially merit-based. This has helped attract and keep top teachers, he said.

“I think it really comes from the top down,” Tanaka said. “They really make the environment work, and [they] care. I can go and reflect with them and take risks.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@goolgemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
GED Test Shifts to New Version to Fit Common Core

By Jenni White

On January 2, 2014, the GED test shifted to a new version fully aligned with Common Core national K–12 benchmarks. The high-school-equivalency test now costs nearly twice as much and will be offered only on computers.

“This is not about Common Core—this is about jobs and how to be successful in a job and in life,” said C.T. Turner, director of public affairs for GED Testing Services. “The GED tests high school equivalence, but also career pathways. In most states, 50 percent of all available jobs are ‘middle-skill’ jobs—jobs that require some college but not a B.A. We are aligning the GED with the Common Core in order to fulfill the need for those jobs necessary to compete in a global economy.”

The new test costs approximately $120 per student, a pricetag that has a dozen states looking for alternatives, as taxpayers often subsidize the test. Montana, New Hampshire, and New York chose to switch from GED to another high school equivalency test in 2013. Eight more states are considering a similar decision, according to the Associated Press.

“Montanans who are looking to improve their economic situation by obtaining a high school equivalency diploma should not have to overcome a significant financial barrier in order to achieve that goal,” said Montana State Superintendent Denise Juneau.

In 2011, the most recent year for which figures are available, 690,774 Americans took the GED. The largest percentage of test-takers were between 19 and 24 years old, at 36.7 percent, followed by students 16 to 18 years old, at 23.4 percent. Though most respondents did not identify their reasons for taking the GED, of those that did, the top three categories involved obtaining admission to a two-year college (31 percent), technical or trade school (24.6 percent), or four-year college (21.5 percent).

‘A Lot of Uncertainty’
The new test is expected to be more difficult for students to pass, and broad unfamiliarity with it among test preparers had Lee Weiss, director of GED Programs for Kaplan Test Prep, recommending those who could take the GED before it changes should do so.

“There’s a lot of uncertainty ... in January 2014,” he said. Among the shifts for students already on the academic edge include a new scoring scale before it changes should do so.

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“There’s a lot of uncertainty ... in January 2014,” he said. Among the shifts for students already on the academic edge include a new scoring scale and moving from five subject areas to four.

“The content will be more difficult, and most GED takers are unlikely to have had experience taking computer-based tests,” Weiss said.

Fitting Common Core
The new GED uses the College and Career Ready Standards for Adult Education, from the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Vocational and Adult Education. Writer Susan Pimentel, who was one of five lead writers for Common Core national K–12 standards, acknowledges the assistance of a wide variety of “stakeholders” in preparing the document, including three of the other Common Core lead writers.

According to the standards document, the Common Core State Standards were “selected as the basis for the review and recommendations in this report. It notes “[report] panelists did not have the autonomy to add content to the CCSS.”

Defining High School
GED switched to fit Common Core because the latter now defines high school-level education for most students in the country, GED’s president told the Associated Press.

Change the Equation, an organization launched by President Barack Obama, released a report stating GED is not the only high-school completion marker out of joint with Common Core. The report, titled “Out of Sync,” concludes that of the 45 states that have adopted Common Core, just 11 have graduation requirements that match expectations of the new standards, and 13 are partially aligned.

“This was a down and dirty study by Change the Equation,” said Sandra Stotsky, professor emerita at the University of Arkansas and former overseer of graduation standards for Massachusetts. “It didn’t look at course descriptions, just the labels given to math courses.” A course title may say Algebra 2, for example, but not include all the standard Algebra 2 content.

“The Common Core standards are not content-based, and aligning curricula to the standards can actually dumb down graduation requirements.”

SANDRA STOTSKY
PROFESSOR EMERITA
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

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Literacy Group Finds Success Engaging Families

By Ashley Bateman

Teacher Jenny Jackaway knows firsthand that parent involvement can transform learning. She has built a nonprofit organization called Pages and Chapters around that concept. It provides families reading advice and tutoring, and requires parent or caregiver attendance at the literacy sessions she runs through local schools and libraries.

The organization’s structured literacy program, Open Books, involves families and volunteers in a series of once-weekly sessions for kids in grades K–5. The grassroots effort began in the homes of Jackaway’s students in Missouri.

“I would get phone calls from my parents on a very regular basis, not knowing how to do their kids’ homework or how to help them,” Jackaway said.

Teaching literacy can be difficult for parents, who may be well-educated but not know the foundation points of reading, Jackaway said.

Jackaway offered to tutor students after school, but transportation and scheduling conflicts arose immediately.

“Sometimes the families we work with are really struggling to put food on the table, and sometimes they just don’t have the full resources at their disposal to work on things [with their child],” Jackaway said. “So I said, ‘I’ll come to you.’”

Parent Empowerment Key

Jackaway found offering parents appropriate tools in the home was far more effective than teacher-student tutoring sessions.

“One you involve the parents, a few things happen,” she said. “The parents are more informed about what they can do, [whether it’s] phonics flash cards, reading a book with their child and stopping to ask vocabulary and comprehension questions, increasing vocabulary usage throughout the day. It helps foster student-parent relationships, and I’ve seen more results bringing parents in.”

In year two of her efforts, Jackaway tutored for two or three families, “meeting them at McDonald’s, the library, wherever,” she said. “One was homeless. I didn’t think I could keep doing it. I loved it, but it wasn’t practical.”

So she turned her hobby into a nonprofit organization, which opened in 2012.

Families Appreciative

“It did give me an opportunity to look at what [my daughter’s] reading patterns really were,” said Felechia Vineyard. Jackaway tutored Vineyard’s daughter, Epiphany. “It made me aware of what I could help her do at home, things she may have been struggling with at school. It was a little bit of an eye-opener.”

The library-based program increased Epiphany’s joy in reading and turned her into a voracious reader, Vineyard said.

Many of Open Books’ volunteer tutors are teachers. Chelsea Mossman had just started teaching in Kansas City when she met Jackaway.

“I can use what I’ve been using in my classroom but individualize it for one student,” Mossman said. “Being in an inner-city district, I know the struggles that come with parents not knowing how to teach their kids. Pages and Chapters brings them all together. It’s only an hour a week, but ... I could see growth in just three or four weeks.”

Strengthening Relationships

This year Mossman worked one-on-one with a child and his grandfather, who had a strained relationship at the start of the session, she said.

“One of the most important things we worked on was praise,” she said. “That transformed the student and their relationship; his confidence needed to be up.”

Connie Campbell, who has a PhD in reading, advises Jackaway’s organization.

“I really valued [Jackaway’s] empowerment of people, ... not to fix a child but to increase the learning capacity within the home and empower parents,” Campbell said. “I’ve worked with literally thousands of teachers, and no one has impressed me as much as Jenny.”

Examining Success

In spring 2013, Pages and Chapters partnered with Mill Creek Upper Elementary School in Belton, Missouri to measure the effectiveness of the Open Books program, using control and experimental groups.

Campbell used students’ classroom assignments to assess their reading ability. She also surveyed families before and after they participated.

The top areas of increased improvement, as identified by parents and students, were parents’ attitudes toward reading, which improved 14 percent; reading for pleasure improved 18 percent; and the enjoyment of discussing books improved 26 percent.

The program also tests students so parents can pinpoint where their child is struggling.

Finding Funds

Fundraisers, grants, individual donors, and local businesses all contribute to the organization.

Campbell designed evaluation tools to give the organization data to obtain grants and grow. Pages and Chapters won its first grant from the Junior League of Kansas City in 2013.

Jan Finn reviewed the Pages and Chapters grant application for the Junior League. Promoting volunteerism and community improvement were just part of the appeal, Finn said.

“Pages and Chapters began with a small group of committed teachers who saw a need to teach children to read, without any source of funding,” Finn said.

Moving On Up

Two summers and one full school year later, Pages and Chapters’ Open Books program is beginning to outgrow its space at the local library. A designer is developing for them an iPhone-based application for parents and children.

“I think Jenny will emerge as a national leader in some matter in the field,” Campbell said. “She could take [Open Books] and create a licensed program which could be marketed across the board.”

The nonprofit organization capitalizes on an often-missing element in education, especially for needy children: parents.

“The connection between families, schools, and students is crucial ... and definitely missing at a lot of schools,” Mossman said.

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@gmail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
Reclaiming Lives Through Humanities Education

Review by Jay Lehr, Ph.D.

Writer Earl Shorris had looked everywhere for answers to the toughest questions about poverty in the United States. One resounding answer came from his conversation with a woman in a maximum-security prison: The difference between rich and poor is their understanding of the humanities.

Shorris took that idea and started a course at the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Center in New York City. With a faculty of friends, he began teaching the great works of literature and philosophy from Plato to Kant, Cervantes to Socrates, and Hume, all at the college level, to dropouts, immigrants, and ex-prisoners. From that class have come two dentists, a nurse, two PhDs, a fashion designer, a drug counselor, and other successes.

Over the next 17 years, the course expanded to many U.S. cities and foreign countries. President Bill Clinton awarded Shorris a National Humanities Medal for founding the Clemente Course in the Humanities and changing the lives of thousands of people stuck in poverty. Now Shorris has written *The Art of Freedom: Teaching Humanities to the Poor*, the stories of those who teach and who study the humanities, a tribute to the courage of people rising from unspeakable poverty to engage in dialogue with professors from great universities around the world.

The book will appeal to educators who care for their students and to those who never cease to be enthralled by the human condition. It illustrates how education can open the potential of those whom others think have none.

**Escape Portal**

The center of every Clemente Course is now, as it has always been, the students who came heroically from the edge of hopelessness to the beauty and clarity of reflective thinking. The Clemente Course teaches classical works in moral philosophy, art history, history, literature, and logic.

The first course was taught to women in prison in 1995. All were eventually released. None returned to prison. Such a recidivism rate is otherwise unknown.

Shorris had spent three years interviewing poor people around the country and found numerous forces, including hunger, isolation, illness, landlords, police, abuse, drugs, criminals, racism, and others creating what he calls a “surround of force” that prevents these people from interacting with society. He figured out how to open a portal of escape from conditions that ravaged these people.

He insisted the courses be taught by capable professors from esteemed universities, figured out how to entice them into doing it, and found the money to pay them and support each course with the help of local people who believed in what he was doing.

“**This is an amazing story from a man [Earl Shorris, right] who lived to see his dream become a reality across the world. It is also a travelogue of the world and the people who live in it. It is a story more people in the field of education need to hear.”**

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**Most Indiana Kids Read with Family**

By Joy Pullmann

Eighty-five percent of Indiana children under age six have relatives reading to them at least three times a week, according to a recent study. That percentage ties Indiana with Connecticut, Iowa, Michigan, North Dakota, and Utah among the top reading states.

Reading with family usually indicates a child has a nurturing home environment and adequate attention, says the Annie E. Casey Foundation study. Reading is also the most important thing parents can do to ensure a child doesn’t need preschool or remediation.

“When we welcome our new kindergarten students, it’s obvious which ones have been read to at home and which ones have not,” principal Mark Conrad told the *Herald Times*.

It is common for middle- and higher-income families to read to their children, but not for poorer families. The lack of reading, combined with typically less talking to children in poorer families, means a poor child will have heard two words for every seven her higher-income counterparts have heard. This verbal gap then tends to remain throughout the child’s life and is the main source of academic achievement gaps between children of different income levels.

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is a research fellow of The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
Why So Many Children Struggle to Read

By Patrick Herrera

Federal, state, and school district efforts to address struggling readers expend a great deal of time and fortune, yet our reading woes continue. Second-language learners in Latino communities, in particular, consistently show high rates of reading deficiencies.

James Popham, an emeritus professor of education at UCLA and authority on assessment research, argues standardized assessments do not bring relevant information to where change can take place: teachers in the classroom.

Students in Latino communities have a dual challenge. In addition to learning a second language, they have low literacy, or even illiteracy, in their primary language. This deficiency, which stems from the home environment, prompts the achievement gap early, and it widens through the grades.

Teachers need better understanding of illiteracy, along with better training and cognitive development tutorials that address basic literacy skills. A child speaking only Spanish, and with low literacy skills in his own language, arrives in first grade and is handed a text in English. That doesn’t make sense.

Parenting Is Key

The problem stems from a gap in cognitive development before first grade. The critical ages for building the basics for literacy are three, four, and five. Without this training at home, a child is unprepared for first grade, and the achievement gap widens as textbooks become more complex through the grades.

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What Is Illiteracy?

Therefore, in addition to literacy, we must also address illiteracy. The confusion occurs when the question arises, “What can we do about it?”

Curriculum frequently does not include instruction in the cognitive development process of reading. Every year, teachers introduce reading curricula that expand in breadth and depth, and students continue to receive for other core areas texts they cannot read. English-speaking students often cannot read critically or express themselves adequately in writing.

More than a dozen states have introduced legislation to retain third-graders who can barely read, according to the Wall Street Journal. It is becoming clear there is a persistent problem, and it becomes evident in the early elementary grades. Although states focus efforts on third grade, the problem happens because language development didn’t occur at the second and first grades and even before that. We have to address the problem, not the symptoms.

Building Literacy Skills

Several states are now committing funds to third-grade literacy programs. Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad, for example, has called for interventions such as 90 minutes of reading instruction per session. These interventions also should include instruction in the learning process that leads to reading skill. But the students in intervention programs usually receive another book to read, which is exactly what they can’t do.

A phonics program is a critical first step, but the teacher must be aware of the cognitive process involved and what constitutes proficiency. Phonics is part of an area that is also known as “alphabetics.” This involves several skills, beginning with mastering the inventory of sounds that exist in a language. The learner grasps that a series of sounds represents a word and then expands to form a group of words that compose a thought. Next, the child must convert those sounds into writing. To do this, learners must master both.

The next skill is converting written language into fluent speech. Speech should reproduce the language’s sounds correctly and fluently, along with proper word stress, intonation, etc. This is commonly called “decoding,” and it is critical to reading. However, developing this skill depends on mastering the more basic skills. Curricula often do not take this progression into account. Thus the classroom teacher tackles decoding when the learner does not have the skills required to perform the task.

The third element in reading development is vocabulary. As simple as this sounds, it is a highly complex instructional and learning process. Vocabulary is often taught in lists of random words with a single meaning per word. However, context often changes a connotation or an entire meaning.

Vocabulary can be grouped as discrete or conceptual. The former refers to words that can be visualized. These are easily learned. The latter represents concepts that cannot be visualized, such as frugal, economy, negotiate, etc. Such difficult concepts must be approached via discrete vocabulary.

Before a reader begins a text, there must be a high level of comprehension of the vocabulary in that text. If a reader is unfamiliar with as little as 10 to 15 percent of the vocabulary in a text, reading it will be difficult. Reading strategies such as cognates, discerning meaning through context, word families, etc., are fine for readers who are much more accomplished, but early readers can’t apply these strategies.

If a reader keeps pausing to link a sound to its corresponding written letter(s), decode, or reflect on a word’s meaning, comprehension is lost.

Addressing reading deficiencies must be done through teachers, with training and appropriate curriculum. Legislating performance requirements won’t solve this complex problem.

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