Thirty-Five Mississippi Schools Eligible for Parent Trigger

By Ashley Bateman

Thirty-five Mississippi schools have performed so poorly for three years in a row that parents can now convert them into charter schools under the state’s 2010 Parent Trigger law. This is the first year any Mississippi schools are eligible. About 50 schools improved their performance and thus avoided the eligible list.

“Mississippi is handing a lot of power over to parents with this law,” said Laura Jones, school improvement director for the Mississippi Department of Education.

Trigger-Only Charters
Charter schools are available to families only through Mississippi’s Parent Trigger law, and then only 12 existing schools may be converted into the independently run public schools. So far, "Charters can provide children trapped in failing schools with a good public school option, provided that the legislation governing charters is written tightly enough.”

NANCY LOOME, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, MISSISSIPPI PARENTS’ CAMPAIGN

MISSISSIPPI, p. 2
Seniority Rules Mean Confusion for Oregon Teachers

By Joy Pullmann

After half a day of math training, Oregon high school history teacher Jessica Keskitalo is teaching seventh-grade math this school year. She is one of 365 teachers Beaverton School District has shifted according to seniority rather than classroom needs during budget cuts. Oregon requires districts to lay off teachers with the least experience first, rather than according to quality or expertise.

Other teachers have been moved from social studies to science, singing to math, library to elementary homeroom, art to language arts, library to music, French to science, and more.

Approximately 160 teachers were placed in “significantly different positions,” the district estimated. Keskitalo, 35, has never taught math and has taught middle school only during one month of student teaching. But her teaching license is broad enough to qualify her for the new position.

Teachers and principals had no say over the transfers. Eleven states require districts to consider seniority during layoffs, and most school districts do so, according to the National Council on Teacher Quality.

Beaverton transferred district librarian Jenny Take-da into a third-grade classroom a week before the Oregon Association of School Libraries named her Librarian of the Year. She chose to substitute teach while rethinking her career, instead.

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Thirty-Five Mississippi Schools Eligible for the Parent Trigger

Continued from page 1

no school’s parents have chosen to pull the trigger.

Parents have very little accurate information about charters, and none on successfully evaluating one, said Anne Foster, executive director of Parents for Public Schools (PPS).

Gov. Phil Bryant (R) and Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves are expected to press for charter school legislation in 2013.

“Charters can provide children trapped in failing schools with a good public school option, provided that the legislation governing charters is written tightly enough,” said Nancy Loome, executive director of the Mississippi Parents’ Campaign.

Chronically failing Mississippi schools also have tried federal reforms targeted to states’ worst 5 percent of schools, such as School Improvement Grants, which send such schools more money and require them to change staff.

“The 62,000 parents involved with the Parents’ Campaign overwhelmingly favor improvement in traditional schools over a charter option,” Loome said. “We get enormous pushback from parents because of our position that favors authorizing charter schools.”

No Parent Consensus

In 2010, Mississippi legislators passed a law stating any school labeled as failing, low-performing, or at risk of failing for three consecutive years is eligible for a majority of parents to petition the state’s department of education to allow the school to be converted into a charter.

Test results starting in 2009–10 determined schools’ labels in 2010–11 and forward.

“Our communities are trying to figure out how to be more actively engaged in improving their schools, but none of them show an interest in charters,” Jones said. “They want to know what we can do to make our present system better.”

No school boards or parents wishing to participate in charter conversion have contacted PPS, Foster said. Four schools in the Clarksdale Municipal School District are eligible for charter conversion, but Superintendent Dennis Dupree said he’s not aware of any parents having expressed interest in exercising that option.

Hinds County Agricultural High School, also eligible for conversion, and nearby Clarksdale County are open-enrollment, meaning parents send children to their school of choice within the district until eighth grade. AHS is also open-enrollment.

Dupree said Clarksdale’s demographics, including a 98 percent poverty rate, have led district leaders to focus on early education, such as pre-kindergarten pilot programs.

“You have to remember that this is something that has to be parent-driven and right now there’s just no consensus among the parents or the community to move in that direction,” said State Conservator Mac Curlee, a consultant to trigger-eligible Okolona High School.

Charter Policy

Charter advocates pushed for a broader law in 2012 but couldn’t win approval in the state House of Representatives, Jones said, largely because the education establishment opposed the bill.

The Parents’ Campaign supports tight charter legislation that allows charters only in chronically low-performing school zones, Loome said. Automatically including all children in a failing district-wide lottery, with parents able to opt out, is key, she said.

“We believe that parents should be at the table when decisions are made that impact their children,” Foster said.

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Pension Crisis Threatens Education

Continued from page 1

In Illinois, about 75 percent of education funding increases go to current teacher retirements, says Jonathan Ingram, pension and health policy director at the Illinois Policy Institute. Before long, most education funding will backfill teacher pensions, he said.

“If we don’t get this problem under control, we’re going to crowd out funding for education,” he said.

States are facing $4 trillion in unfunded pension liabilities, according to Biggs’ research. Since 2009, 45 states have trimmed less than a tenth of that. Since 2007, state and local governments have underpaid actuarily required pension contributions by more than $50 billion, according to U.S. Senator Jim DeMint’s (R-SC) office, which released a September state pensions report. DeMint argued “fiscally responsible states” should not have to “shoulder the bad decisions of irresponsible states.”

Financial Irresponsibility

The huge shortfall is “something of a slow-burning problem,” Biggs said. Governments haven’t been funding their portion of state pensions all along, and now there is no money, he said.

Most government pensions are defined-benefit plans, meaning they offer workers a specific payout no matter what workers contribute.

The National Institute on Retirement Security studied pension systems and found many defined benefit plans that were successful—but the success hinged on the employer or state contributing to the plan, said Diane Oakley, executive director of NIRS.

“They’re cost-effective, and they’re sustainable ... if the employer’s making a contribution and not just making a promise,” she said.

Tax-Paid ‘Ponzi Scheme’

Part of Illinois’ problem is that the government has used “very rosy estimates of their investments” to plan for the future, Ingram said. For the past five to 10 years, the state has expected roughly 8 percent returns while actually making approximately 4 percent, he said.

That’s true of most state pension plans. States have little incentive to estimate accurately, since an accurate accounting would compel them to dedicate more money to the plans. Government accounting rules are usually more lenient than private-sector accounting, Biggs said, and policymakers should begin by getting accurate numbers and facing up to the problem.

“Every time [a pension fund] goes under projections, taxpayers pick up the cost,” Ingram said. “Taxpayers should be worrying, and future teachers might not get a pension.”

Illinois’ Teacher Retirement System has consistently reported it doesn’t have enough money to pay retirees and depends on contributions from current teachers.

“When they run out of the assets, it truly becomes a Ponzi scheme,” Ingram said.

Solutions Offered

Government retirement benefits are typically much more generous than private benefits, Biggs said, and states can cut while keeping them competitive.

Ingram recommends states switch to defined-contribution plans for new hires, where the state contributes a specified amount to a worker’s retirement rather than ensuring a specific payout.

“We really give [employees] the power over their own retirement decisions, and we also give them the responsibility, too,” he said.

He also recommends freezing cost-of-living increases until pensions are fully funded, then matching increases to inflation.

Tweaks Not Enough

Lawmakers are beginning to realize the risks of defined-benefit pensions, Biggs said.

“Stock market returns are strong when the economy’s strong. ... That means your system is going to become unfunded and require more money at exactly the time when the taxpayer is least likely to be able to give it,” he said.

Although some state lawmakers have taken small steps to address this problem, “none of them really addresses the core issue facing us, that pensions are just overly generous and the state doesn’t have the money to fund them,” Ingram said. “The longer lawmakers delay implementing those reforms, the harder it’s going to be.”

Many lawmakers don’t understand how big the problem is, he said, and they have a hard time saying no. Lawmakers often think “taxing and borrowing will solve the problem, when it’s really not a revenue problem; it’s a structural problem,” he said.

Individual vs. Taxpayer Risks

Defined-contribution plans switch investment decisions to individuals, away from professional investors managing taxpayer-financed investments, Oakley notes. However, switching to a defined-contribution plan doesn’t reduce any current unfunded liability, she said.

Defined-benefit plans also encourage employees to stay long term. Teachers typically take about five years to reach their peak, Oakley said, so schools often want to retain teachers after having trained them.

Biggs said defined-benefit pension have “very strange incentives.” These plans hardly accumulate during a worker’s first several years on the job, slanting plans away from young employees.

Once an employee hits mid-career, benefits begin to ramp up quickly. In these years, employees are unlikely to leave voluntarily because they would give up huge pensions.

“These traditional plans are not very well structured in human resource terms, being able to attract people you want and get rid of the people you don’t want,” Biggs said. “A defined-contribution or a cash-balance plan works better.”

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Future Uncertain for New Hampshire Charter Schools

By Vicki Alger

New Hampshire’s board of education said it will not approve new charter schools until the legislature sends them more money, and the results of November’s elections mean that may be difficult in the next legislative session.

Democrats gained a majority in the state House of Representatives starting January, while Republicans retained their state Senate majority. Though prominent Democrats, including President Barack Obama, support charter schools, New Hampshire Democrats tend to be less enthusiastic.

“I am worried about charter schools with a Democrat Majority in the New Hampshire House,” said Ken Weyler (R-Kingston), chairman of the Joint Legislative Fiscal Committee. When Democrats had a majority a few years ago, “they put a two-year moratorium on charter schools.”

Charters’ Popularity Unexpected

Lame-duck lawmakers approved an extra $4.45 million for the 17 charter schools currently operating, but estimates indicate a $5.3 million shortfall remains. Charter schools are due more money because more students want to enroll in them than lawmakers expected.

Part of the problem is the state's school funding formula continues to pay traditional schools for three to four years after a student has moved out. Senate Bill 401 would fund schools according to the most recent year’s enrollment.

Board of education officials said they declared the moratorium on the advice of the state attorney general’s office, over concerns about state liability if the board approves new charter schools without assured funding for fall 2013.

New Hampshire charter schools under state authority receive $5,250 per student from the state, and charters under district authority receive $7,000 to $8,000. Average per-pupil funding for traditional district schools is approximately $12,000.

Disagreement Over Budget

Calculating the funding shortfall depends on how many charter school students there are, and estimates from the New Hampshire Public Charter Schools Association (NHPCSA) and the state education department differ. The education department’s numbers are lower.

The state budget lets the education department spend up to 10 percent above its appropriation if a shortfall occurs. If 10 percent is not enough, it can request additional funding from the fiscal committee. It did not request additional funds. In this case, the legislature approved those additional funds anyway, but the board of education has refused to end its moratorium.

Two Democratic members of the fiscal committee voted against the additional $4.45 million. State Rep. Sharon Nordgren (D-Hanover) and state Sen. Sylvia Larsen (D-Concord) each expressed concerns about authorizing spending without knowing how much schools actually will spend.

Outlook Uncertain

Eileen Liponis, NHPCSA’s executive director, said she worried the moratorium could jeopardize $11.6 million in federal funding already awarded for the new, now in limbo charter schools’ start-up costs.

Department officials “always say they support charters, but do everything behind the scenes to stymie them,” Weyler said, noting connections between anti-charter teachers unions and Democratic lawmakers. “Now they are waiting for the Democrat majority in the House to help stop charters.”

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Michigan Would Fund Children Directly Under New Proposal

By Joy Pullmann

Michigan K-12 students would become free agents, able to attend any in-state public school that will enroll them and even take different classes at different schools, under a proposal Gov. Rick Snyder (R) released in November.

The idea alarms John Austin, president of the State Board of Education: “This is a voucher system,” he told the Detroit Free Press. “The answer is not to say, ‘Here’s the money. Make your own choices.’”

Michigan’s constitution forbids tax funding of “nonpublic” schools. It’s the most restrictive of the 38 states with similar amendments. Post-Civil War Protestants championed such amendments to keep tax dollars away from Catholic schools.

The governor’s 302-page “open enrollment” plan would link the approximately $6,900 Michigan spends per child directly to individual children. The state, like most, currently allots money to districts and programs, not students. The proposal also would give early high school graduates up to $10,000 for college, expand online learning possibilities, and reduce money to schools that do not improve student test scores.

The plan does not allow state money to follow children to private schools. That arrangement defines school vouchers. Instead, it allows families to choose among public schools, without regard to district lines. Families who currently attempt that can be prosecuted.

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Hackers Endorse Texas Student’s Refusal to Wear Tracking Device

A Texas high school can’t expel Andrea Hernandez for refusing to wear a location-tracking ID badge, a district judge ruled November 21.

A week later, an anonymous hacker temporarily disabled the school district’s Web site, threatening long-term interference if the district does not discuss its tracking program with parents. The hacker identified himself as a 16-year-old male.

In September, two San Antonio schools began requiring their 4,000 students to wear ID badges containing radio frequency identification chips that transmit 24/7. Hernandez refused, citing her religious beliefs and right to privacy. The school threatened expulsion. So she sued.

Hernandez refused even to wear a card lacking a chip and battery, though school staff offered her that option twice, her principal said. Wearing it would imply she endorsed the badges, her father said. The sophomore has been wearing her old ID around her neck, instead.

District officials said the trackers identify when students cut class and could increase school coffers $2 million by accurately counting students on the day enrollment determines state funding for the year.

Hernandez had to apply to attend the science and engineering magnet school. Entrance requires an essay, good grades, and attendance. The judge granted her a temporary restraining order as the lawsuit moves forward.

Many Teachers Believe Neuroscience Myths

Teachers believe a great many myths about brain science, such as that learning styles matter and enriching preschool environments boosts learning, according to a study recently published in the journal Frontiers in Psychology.

The more general knowledge a teacher had, the more likely he or she was to believe false, popular myths about how brains work.

The researchers surveyed 242 British and Dutch K-12 teachers about myths such as “individuals learn better when they receive information in their preferred learning style (auditory, visual, kinesthetic, etc.),” “we only use 10 percent of our brains,” and “there are left- and right-brain learners.” Research has shown all of these are untrue.

Yet 47 percent of teachers believed the 10 percent myth, 76 percent believed the enriching environments myth, and a whopping 94 percent believed the learning styles myth. Overall, 49 percent of teachers surveyed indicated they believed something false about how brains work.

“When people lack a general understanding of the brain and do not critically reflect on their readings, they may be more vulnerable to neuromyths,” the study noted. “Thus, a lack of neuroscience literacy and reading popular media may be factors that predict the number of misconceptions teachers have about the brain.”

Okla. Court Tosses Anti-Voucher Lawsuit

School districts cannot sue parents who use state funds to send their special-needs children to private schools, the Oklahoma State Supreme Court ruled 7-2 in November.

The state constitution requires the legislature, not school districts, to provide a “free public education,” Vice Chief Justice Tom Colbert wrote in the majority opinion. Because the legislature uses state and not local funds for the voucher program, school districts can’t sue parents for participating in a program that doesn’t use local money. School districts “are merely the Legislature’s vehicle” for providing most K-12 education, he noted.

The ruling overturns a lower court’s ruling that the vouchers are unconstitutional. Two school districts argued using state funds to support private schools that may be religious violates the Oklahoma constitution, giving them the right to sue parents who do so.

“The parents are clearly not the proper parties against whom to assert these constitutional challenges,” Colbert stated.

Superintendents and school boards for the Union and Jenks school districts issued a statement saying they will consider whether to sue another party over the voucher program’s constitutionality.

The voucher law saves the state $120,000 per year, said state Rep. Jason Nelson (R-Oklahoma City), the law’s co-author. In 2010-11, 135 students participated in the program.
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
61% of Michigan Districts Contract with Private Firms

By James M. Hohman and Josiah Kollmeyer

Michigan’s 2012 budget incentivized school districts to solicit bids from outside vendors to provide support services, among other best practices.

The Mackinac Center for Public Policy’s 2012 school privatization survey shows many districts took the incentive and contracted for at least one of the three main support services. In 2012, 61 percent of all school districts are contracting out for food, custodial, or transportation services, a 13 percent increase over 2011.

The incentive may have hastened the move to contracting, but this is also a long-term trend. In the Mackinac Center’s first survey in 2001, only 31 percent of school districts used contractors to provide the non-instructional services. A nearly 98 percent increase in the past decade shows the practice has gone from a tool used by a handful of districts to a common practice.

Higher Quality, Lower Price

Seeking bids from private vendors adds an element of competition, providing an incentive for quality services at lower prices. Besides saving many districts money, privatization frees resources, allowing districts to focus on their real mission: teaching students.

Custodial service contracting grew the most, with 46 new districts contracting out. Private providers now clean and maintain school buildings and grounds in 39.5 percent of districts statewide. This is now the most commonly contracted service.

Byron Center Public Schools outsourced custodial services to Grand Rapids Building Services this past year. The district contracted primarily for reasons of quality and efficiency, and it reported satisfaction with GRBS. It saved more than $340,000, roughly $100 per pupil.

Contracting of food service grew in 2012 as well, increasing from 33.5 percent to 35.0 percent of districts, with 13 new districts contracting.

Les Cheneaux Community Schools, an Upper Peninsula district, recently privatized its food service director and cafeteria employees through Professional Education Services Group. Over the past school year, the district’s food service fund went from $20,000 in the red to balanced—savings of $71 per pupil.

Transportation contracts grew by 22 districts to 90, a 32.6 percent increase. This is a substantial increase since 2005, when only 3.8 percent of Michigan districts contracted their transportation.

High Satisfaction Rates

Statewide, the new contracts are expected to save districts almost $13 million in the first year alone.

West Bloomfield Schools contracted for both its custodial and transportation services this past year. The 6,523-student district projects three-year savings of $2.8 million on its custodial service and $2.5 million on transportation, a total of $5.3 million in savings from privatization.

Districts report satisfaction on 92 percent of their contracted services this year. This is not surprising since a district contracting out for services can change providers, so vendors have a strong incentive to maintain high standards.

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Schools Waste $37 Billion on Staff Bloat

By Ashley Bateman

The number of public school administrators and nonteaching staff has grown seven times as fast as student enrollment since 1950, according to a new report published by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

Taxpayers would have saved $37.2 billion in that time if the teaching force had instead increased one-and-a-half times as fast as student enrollment and non-teaching staff matched enrollment.

That $37.2 billion would be enough to have raised every teacher’s salary by $11,700 per year over that time, given families in poverty a $2,600 annual voucher for each child, reduced property tax burdens, or eased state fiscal stress, the report notes.

“The staffing levels in the public school system are ultimately a politically generated level, and it’s the preference of powerful interests that are related to the public school system,” said Matthew Ladner, research director for the Foundation for Excellence in Education. “The problem is it has not [resulted in] a proportional increase in student achievement.”

Since 1950, U.S. K-12 student enrollment increased 96 percent, administrative and other nonteaching staff increased 702 percent, and teacher numbers grew 252 percent.

Report author Benjamin Scafidi, a Friedman Foundation economist, compiled data from the National Center for Education Statistics for “The School Staffing Surge: Decades of Employment Growth in America’s Public Schools.”

He also considered nationwide National Assessment of Educational Progress test scores and graduation rates.

**More Staff, Less Learning**

Scafidi found student scores have, on average, decreased as staff numbers surged.

“There is not a lot of evidence to suggest that increased nonteaching staff is even associated or much less causally associated with improved student outcomes,” said Martin West, a Harvard University assistant professor of education.

Empirical studies have demonstrated a tradeoff between quality and quantity for teachers, Scafidi said.

“If you keep hiring teachers, you’re hiring more and more low-quality teachers,” he said. “Good teachers don’t grow on trees.”

This reality contradicts the widespread belief that smaller classes create better results, Ladner said: “Teacher quality is much more important than class size.”

Wraparound services such as psychologists, college counselors, social workers, food service workers, and even health care providers account for most non-instructional personnel, says Noelle Ellerson, a spokeswoman for the American Association of School Administrators.

The public now expects schools to provide these services, she said, and they “are needed to get the students to learn.”

**‘Cost Disease’**

The report casts doubt on claims massive education funding increases benefit children, West says. Some attribute part of the problem to Baumol’s cost disease, a phenomenon where labor costs rise even though workers are not producing more, because productivity gains in other sectors push wages up in competing sectors.

But that can’t explain all the extra spending, West said, because “[Baumol’s] theory would emphasize you’d spend more on the same number of employees.”

The ratio of executives to employees is higher in elementary and secondary schools than in any other business or industry, Ellerson notes.
Task Force to Tackle Kansas School Efficiency

By Vicki Alger

Sam Brownback is the latest Kansas governor to establish a schools efficiency task force. He may be the only one to have prompted a dueling task force from offended school board members.

The Kansas Association of School Boards formed its own efficiency committee, criticizing the governor’s for relying on people with business and accounting experience and not including an educator.

That changed on October 18, when Brownback appointed Iola School District Superintendent Brian Pekarek to the task force. The task force first met on November 9.

Only 15 of Kansas’s 286 school districts comply with a law requiring at least 65 percent of state money to fund classrooms or instruction. The statewide average is 54 percent.

“The people of Kansas deserve to have effective schools that operate as efficiently as possible,” said Ken Willard, chairman of the governor’s task force. “Efficiency does not necessarily mean lower cost. It simply means that taxpayer dollars are spent wisely and conscientiously, and that Kansas students graduate prepared for success.”

Since 2000, student enrollment has remained steady, yet instructional spending increased 84 percent between 1999 and 2011, three times the rate of inflation, according to the Kansas Policy Institute. Half of all state taxes fund education.

Previous Efforts

Efficiency panels in Kansas have been formed roughly every three to five years at least since the 1990s. Since 2007 the state’s legislative audit office has offered voluntary reviews, but just seven districts have requested one.

Pekarek was one of only seven district leaders to request an audit in 2010, when he led Clifton-Clyde Unified School District. It revealed the district could save $230,000 annually by using partially filled classrooms and cutting low-enrollment departments.

“Efficiencies and school systems—like all systems everywhere—can be improved at times,” Pekarek said.

For example, numerous districts enrolling fewer than 4,000 students in a single county have separate payroll, computer, bus, and food services, according to KPI. Improving those would mean more money for instruction.

“Efficiency is not simply about spending less money,” said KPI President Dave Trabert. “[I]t’s about providing the same or better service at a lower cost.”

“Parents are becoming more aware that simply spending more money does nothing to improve student achievement,” Trabert said.

Prospects for Efficiency

The task force will make recommendations to legislators next year.

Willard said he expects a “positive working relationship” with the school boards’ committee.

“Theyir goals may not completely align with those of our task force,” he said, “but any divergence will be handled respectfully.”

Trabert said outsiders can bring a fresh, disinterested perspective to school spending.

“The governor’s office is trying to find ways to provide outside-the-classroom functions at a lower cost,” explained Trabert. “KASB is focused on justifying and perpetuating the current system.”

That system, he notes, cost $12,656 per pupil in 2011, yet only 56 percent of 11th graders test proficient in reading, and just 49 percent do so in math.

“Parents are becoming more aware that simply spending more money does nothing to improve student achievement,” Trabert said.

Vicki Alger, Ph.D. (heartlander@vicki-alger.com) is a senior fellow at the Independent Women’s Forum.
Education reformers and teachers unions often find themselves on opposite sides of reform issues. A new report from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute quantifies teachers unions’ strength state by state, enabling both sides to identify opportunities for their agendas.


“Both sides agree that, for better or worse, teacher unions look out for teacher interests,” the report says. “This study sheds light on how they use politics to do this, by measuring teacher union strength, state by state, more comprehensively than any other study to date.”

One union, the Florida Education Association, called the report “laughable.” The report ranks FEA 50th out of 51 states and Washington, DC. The New Jersey Education Association, ranked seventh, called the report’s metrics “silly,” though its spokesman agreed the union is “very strong.”

“How Strong Are U.S. Teacher Unions? A State-By-State Comparison” took three years to compile, said Michael Petrilli, executive vice president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. It measures union strength by 37 variables across five measures: resources and membership, political involvement, scope of bargaining, state policies, and perceived influence.

**Influence Over Classrooms**

The report states no conclusions about the relationship between union strength and student achievement.

“[Unions’] whole existence is to safeguard teachers,” Winkler said. “In some ways that is in direct opposition to what’s best for kids, and I think most people recognize that.”

Unions, she notes, fight to have teachers hired and fired based on seniority rather than quality, though higher-quality teachers increase children’s learning. And in the 32 states that require local school districts to negotiate with unions, “in the end that gives principals less leeway to hire the best people.”

Fordham’s surveys revealed “at least some evidence” union influence is waning, Winkler said.

“More and more union insiders were saying states are enacting policies less in line with union priorities,” she said. “All these conflicts we’re hearing about on the ground [indicate] that unions are feeling the heat more than they used to.”

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**Education Deeply Unionized**

Education employs more unionized staff than any other profession, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The nation’s largest teachers unions, the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers, have approximately 4.6 million members in total.

“I don’t think a lot of people realize how many teachers are unionized,” said Amber Winkler, a report coauthor and Fordham’s vice president of research. “Some people don’t even know how gener-
Did Critics of Common Core Topple Tony Bennett?

By Joy Pullmann

Although national pundits have linked Tea Partiers to Indiana School Superintendent Tony Bennett’s loss to union official Glenda Ritz November 6, polls and ground-level observation indicate the reformer lost largely by alienating moms and teachers.

“Ritz was able to pick up some Tea Party support over their concerns about Common Core [education standards],” Brian Howey told School Reform News. He runs Howey Politics Indiana, a tracking and analysis publication. “That might have had some impact, but I don’t believe it was the key element in Bennett’s defeat.”

Howey fingered Ritz’s “social media campaign that tapped into the teachers who were very upset with the Bennett reforms.”

That’s not how it looked to out-of-state reformers, among whom Bennett was well known for driving Indiana’s statewide school vouchers, teacher accountability tied to student test scores, and education standards 46 states adopted in response to Obama administration grant and accountability requirements. From Massachusetts, the Pioneer Institute’s Jim Stergios wrote, “the numbers point to anger among his base over his vocal support for and adoption of the national standards and tests.”

In Washington, DC, the American Enterprise Institute’s Rick Hess tagged Bennett’s loss to the union and “frustration among Tea Party conservatives that Bennett was championing an initiative that they’ve come to see as an Obama administration initiative.”

In Virginia, Bellwether Education Partners’ Andrew Rotherham wrote Bennett was “caught in a pincer between conservatives upset about his friendliness to the Common Core standards and an education establishment upset about ... his support for ambitious and disruptive reform.”

Mourdock Effect

The counties where Bennett ran behind mirrored the gap for Republican U.S. Senate candidate Richard Mourdock: huge losses in Democratic-leaning areas and weak support in Republican-leaning ones. Theirs were the only high-profile Republican losses in Indiana, as voters simultaneously elected a new Republican governor and Republican House and Senate majorities while supporting Mitt Romney for president.

Both candidates lost big in the state’s three largest school districts: Indianapolis, Fort Wayne, and Gary. All three districts perform poorly and have been subject to state school takeovers and attrition from voucher students under Bennett’s oversight.

To win an Indiana statewide election, a Republican must win Fort Wayne, not suffer terribly in Indianapolis and Chicago-hugging Lake County (which encompasses Gary), and win big in Republican rural areas and “donut” counties surrounding Indianapolis, said Justin Busch, a regional representative for outgoing Sen. Dick Lugar (R). Bennett and Mourdock failed at all three.

Whereas Republicans such as governor-elect Mike Pence ran positive, center-right campaigns, Bennett and Mourdock acted and were labeled “hyperconservative.” Voters nervous about Mourdock showed up to vote against him, and they also likely voted against Bennett, local strategists said.

Distaste Among Women Voters

Bennett lost particularly with women voters, more of whom were undecided late in the race, said pollster Christine Matthews.

She called the “mom/teacher grassroots network” the reason Bennett lost.

Many teachers thought Bennett “arrogant and heavy-handed,” said Indianapolis mother Heather Crossin, whose children attend public and parochial schools. Crossin has traveled the state to argue against the Common Core. Teachers with whom she has spoken fear Indiana’s Department of Education “is trying to micromanage their classrooms. The Common Core is being pushed down their throats. My sense is that Common Core did play a part and may have pushed things over the edge. I personally know many conservatives who did not vote for him.”

Democrat-Style Campaigning

The Ritz campaign implemented social media and outreach tactics that benefited President Barack Obama nationwide. Through Facebook and Twitter, it “looped in” Indiana’s approximately 50,000 teachers, Howey said.

The Indiana State Teachers Association, a union, targeted Bennett instead of other candidates who championed the state’s sweeping 2011 education reforms, such as state Sen. David Long and House Speaker Brian Bosma. That focus paid off.

“Each teacher had, say, three to five people—maybe more—in their family and social circles who were motivated to vote against Bennett,” Howey wrote. “Teachers also have a greater rapport with mothers of their students. In our October Howey/DePauw poll, Bennett was having problems with Republicans and female voters. There are the major reasons he lost.”

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

School Closings Loom in Chicago, Washington DC

By Joy Pullmann

Chicago and Washington, DC officials are attempting to prepare parents and teachers for school closings. Both have lost thousands of students in the past decade, a national trend among urban districts: Chicago is down about 6 percent and DC 35 percent.

Keeping extra doors open despite astonishing budget deficits satisfies one group, however: “If you close our schools, there will be no peace in the city,” promised Chicago Teachers Union vice president Jesse Sharkey.

Closures also will be difficult in DC. After she closed 23 mostly low-performing schools, voters ousted former chancellor Michelle Rhee’s boss for a union-backed mayor.

New Chancellor Kaya Henderson says DC wastes money on half-empty schools. In a hearing, however, city council members objected to closing schools in their wards but agreed closure savings should go toward improving academics.

Both cities desperately need that. Half of Chicago students and 40 percent of DC students drop out. Four in five fourth graders in both districts can barely read.

DC and Chicago students have flocked to charter schools, independently run public schools free to pursue different educational philosophies or course offerings. Charters often boast better academics. But they can’t help fill empty schools, since school districts rarely let charters use their buildings.

Joy Pullmann ([jpullmann@heartland.org](mailto:jpullmann@heartland.org)) is a research fellow of The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
$7.7 Mil. in Online Texts Frustrate Virginia Parents and Teachers

By Kenric Ward

A technological leap forward is taking Virginia’s largest school district backward, say critics of a new math program.

Fairfax County Public Schools’ decision to purchase $7.7 million in online textbooks surprised parents, who had been told the system had no money to spare, and the move is frustrating teachers and students who say the Internet-based system isn’t working for them.

“The ‘books’ cannot be put on a standalone reader, which means they won’t work on the most affordable devices like Kindles and Nooks. The materials are inaccessible in places without an Internet connection ...”

STEVE GREENBERG, PRESIDENT, FAIRFAX COUNTY FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

FCPS spokesman John Torre acknowledged glitches, but he said the materials were the most cost-effective option and selected through competitive bidding.

“An online textbook license is $11 less expensive than one hard-copy textbook,” he said, noting the district has not purchased math texts in 12 years.

Paper Tiger

Since classes resumed this fall, instructors have been burning through paper to provide hard-copy materials to students.

Oakton High School exhausted its October allotment of paper by day 10, said local Parent-Teacher Association President Kirsten Rucker.

“My children’s math teacher does not assign homework out of the text anymore, due to concerns of access,” Rucker said. “Ideally, our student population would have access to both an online and full-time, hard-copy text, but if we had to decide on just one, it would without question be the hard-copy text. ... The digitized books are not at all user-friendly. I would be very comfortable using the term ‘user frustrating.’”

In a statement, Torre said the district “is committed to preparing our students to be twenty-first century learners, and incorporating online textbooks into instructional practices is one of the ways we are doing so.”

Publishers are telling schools the industry is moving from tangible to virtual textbooks “over the next few years,” he wrote.

“This is about upper-level administrators recklessly attempting to look progressive,” Greenberg said. “It reflects incompetence at the highest levels.”

“It was done much too quickly,” agreed school board member Patty Reed, who voted against the purchase. “It wasn’t discussed in the context of the budget deliberations. It just kind of came out of the clear blue.”

Program Tweaks

The district previously tested an online program in seventh-grade history and high-school government classes at selected schools.

FCPS is considering buying print copies to address concerns about pupil access, Torre said. He also said publishers are working on a program to let students and teachers download the online texts—a function currently unavailable.

At a teachers’ meeting November 14, Superintendent Jack Dale vowed to “make sure” every student who needs a hardbound math text will get one.

“Where will the money come from?” Greenberg asked.

Kenric Ward (kenric@watchdogvirginia.org) is a reporter for the Watchdog.org Virginia Bureau, where this article first appeared. Reprinted with permission.

“... The digitized books are not at all user-friendly. I would be very comfortable using the term ‘user frustrating.’”
Florida Aims to Have One in Five Students Attend Choice Schools

By Ashley Bateman

Florida’s Department of Education wants to double K–12 enrollment in charter and voucher schools from 9 percent of students to 17 percent in the next six years, according to its strategic plan released in October.

“These are really ambitious goals by the Board of Education, which are really consistent with our own projections, our own ambitions,” said Jon East, a vice president of the tax credit scholarship nonprofit Step Up for Students (SUFS).

Through open enrollment, special-needs vouchers, charter schools, and tax credit scholarships, 43 percent of Florida students attend schools of choice, according to state data SUFS collected.

“The way that the [tax credit scholarship] statute is set up there’s a lot of potential for growth to meet that demand,” said Mike Kooi, executive director of the FDOE’s office of school choice. “I think those numbers will be met. … We’ve seen incredible growth, not only in the participation, but the interest in the program.”

SUFS primarily runs Florida’s tax credit scholarships, which allow poor students to attend private schools using scholarships funded by tax-deductible donations. More than 40,000 students received one in 2011–12, almost twice as many as in 2008–09. Florida law allows the program to increase participation approximately 25 percent in any year demand meets the lost tax revenue and enrollment caps.

“We certainly think that the interest of low-income families [is adequate] to reach the 100,000 mark,” East said.

Bursting the Seams

Florida’s John M. McKay Scholarship lets special-education students attend private schools using tax dollars. It also has grown, but not as quickly as charter attendance and tax credit scholarships: 24,194 students enrolled in the McKay program in 2011–12, 4,342 more than in 2008–09.

“The numbers of children being diagnosed with a disability are slowly going down in Florida,” Kooi said. “And that’s not necessarily a bad thing. … You want to try to educate kids in a normal setting.”

The number of charter schools has grown from five in 1996 to 577 in 2012.

“Last year we had almost 180,000 students in charter schools,” East said. “There’s a very robust charter environment within Florida, so it seems as though there’s only one way for that to go, and that’s up.”

Voucher Possibilities

In 2006, the state supreme court struck down a voucher program for students attending failing public schools, ruling vouchers violate the state constitution’s requirement of a “uniform” public school system. In November, voters did not approve a measure to let state funds flow to religiously affiliated institutions.

“Contrary to what opponents say, [that] amendment [wasn’t] about vouchers,” said Jaryn Emhof, a spokeswomen for the Foundation for Florida’s Future. The amendment would affect Floridians’ ability to receive social services from private and parochial providers, she said.

“The uniformity clause … is obviously not uniform in quality of education,” said Bob Sanchez, a policy director for the James Madison Institute. “The uniformity was in the fact that the school boards ran things. [The amendment] wouldn’t necessarily free the state to have more school voucher programs.”

Growth in Online Education

One impediment to Florida school choice is school boards that try to prevent competitors from starting local charter schools, Sanchez said.

“The areas of growth will probably be in charter schools and online education,” Sanchez said. “In Florida we allow hybridization, … so it’s a choice-friendly environment and the choices are multiplying, especially in digital education.”

What ultimately will determine a program’s popularity are the families that choose it, Kooi said.

“The biggest thing is the demand of parents for choice, of parents that want an environment that meets the needs of their individual child,” Kooi said.

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

Federal Billions for School Improvement Didn’t Improve Schools Significantly

By Joy Pullmann

The federal government’s strategy of spending billions to fix failing public schools has accomplished nothing significant, according to figures from a newly released U.S. Department of Education analysis.

From 2009–10 to 2010–11, federal researchers tracked schools where average student test scores failed to meet federal benchmarks for at least two years in a row. Federal grants sponsored new staff, consultants, professional development, and longer class time. In a third of the 733 schools, average student test scores fell. A quarter of the schools improved before receiving the grants, then slid back after receiving the money and implementing the federally mandated changes.

The department highlighted that one-quarter of School Improvement Grant (SIG) schools made “double-digit gains” in math and 15 percent did so in reading, but it did not release exact pre- or post-intervention average test scores or say how many gains, if any, were statistically significant.

“Double-digit gains” could mean simply that a school went from 10 percent to 20 percent proficient in math, meaning the great majority of children attending still can barely perform basic academic functions, notes Andy Smarick, a partner at Bellwether Education.

In math, 40 percent of SIG schools made “single-digit gains” and 49 percent did so in reading, but it did not release exact pre- or post-intervention average test scores or say how many gains, if any, were statistically significant.

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

Homeschoolers Happier, Better-Adjusted in College

By Isabel Lyman

The nation’s approximately two million homeschoolers, whom others frequently scrutinize and even stigmatize as socially inept, are better adjusted emotionally in college than their non-homeschooled peers, a new study concludes.

A peer-reviewed study titled “The Impact of Homeschooling on the Adjustment of College Students,” by Cynthia K. Drenovsky, a sociology professor at Shippsburg University, and Isaiah Cohen, compared self-esteem and depression among conventionally schooled college students to college students who had a homeschooling background.

The pair pondered whether lack of “constant social stimulation” of the sort the average high school student experiences daily resulted in any significant emotional maladjustment for homeschooled students who elected to attend college.

The short answer is no.

Survey Says

Drenovsky and Cohen concluded homeschooled “do not exhibit any significant differences in self-esteem, and they experience significantly lower levels of depression than those with no homeschooling.”

The authors also report, “they [homeschoolers] have achieved greater academic success and ... rate their college experience more positively” than their traditionally schooled counterparts.

In a telephone interview, Cohen said the study results reflect that homeschooled “find positive things associated with parent-led home-based education,” and their findings are “consistent with the current body of homeschooling research.

Study Methods

Drenovsky and Cohen conducted their research by distributing an online survey consisting of 29 questions to more than 1,500 students, 18 years of age and older, who have some homeschooling in their backgrounds. They culled a comparison group of collegians without homeschooling backgrounds from students attending a four-year public university.

Of the 1,580 invited participants, 185 responded, of which 150 were homeschooled at some point during their K-12 years. The average age of the respondents was 20, and 61 percent were female.

The study used questions compiled from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, including “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself” and “I feel I do not have much to be proud of.” Respondents were asked to strongly agree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree with the statements, and they also were asked about pre-college extracurricular involvement, such as Boy Scouting or church attendance.

Academics Weigh In

Homeschooling researchers Milton Gaither, the author of Homeschool: An American History, and Brian D. Ray, founder of the National Home Education Research Institute, wrote about the study on their respective Web sites.

Gaither critiqued the methodology used, including the “limited” sample of survey respondents. Gaither asked and answered this question: “To what extent can the results ... be generalized to the entire population of homeschoolers and non-homeschooled? In my view, very little.”

Ray, on the other hand, noted Drenovsky and Cohen “found positive things associated with parent-led home-based education,” and their findings are “consistent with the current body of homeschooling research.

The study does comport with conclusions others have established: Parent involvement in education positively affects students’ emotional well-being.

Isabel Lyman writes from Petoskey, Michigan.

“[Homeschoolers] do not exhibit any significant differences in self-esteem, and they experience significantly lower levels of depression than those with no homeschooling.”

CYNTHIA K. DRENOVSKY
ISAIAH COHEN

MINNESOTA BACKS DOWN ON RESTRICTING FREE ONLINE CLASSES

By Bruce Edward Walker

The Minnesota Office of Higher Education reversed its threat to enforce a 20-year-old statute that would have prevented residents from taking free online college classes from California-based education provider Coursera.

After several publications reported the ban on free Internet classes, MOHE backed down from enforcing the law and said it will work with legislators to update the statute.

Thirty-three accredited universities, including Princeton, Columbia, Stanford, and Johns Hopkins, currently enroll more than 1.7 million people in Coursera’s free online classes.

Widespread Internet opposition to the law went viral after the Chronicle of Higher Education published an article by Katherine Mangan on October 18. Mangan reported the MOHE told Coursera the company’s courses violated a state law requiring all education providers within Minnesota’s borders to pay a licensing fee.

“Government has been slow to rethink the legal monopolies they’ve granted select universities,” said Michael Van Beek, education policy director at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.

“Students currently cannot earn credits for Coursera classes. Minnesota crediting fees start at $250 for one course but can rise to $12,000 for several courses and include a $1,200 annual renewal fee.

“As the demand for and quality of online education continues to increase, states will have to rethink the legal monopolies they’ve granted select universities,” said Michael Van Beek, education policy director at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.

“Better-Adjusted in College” by Isabel Lyman was managing editor of InfoTech & Telecom News from 2010 to 2012.
New Indianapolis School Board Reformers Plan Future

By Ashley Bateman

A new reform majority on the Indianapolis School Board is poised to make significant changes in the low-performing Indiana school district.

In several close races, voters elected newcomers Gayle Cosby, a Lawrence Township teacher; Caitlin Hannon, a former Indianapolis Public Schools teacher; and businessman Sam Odle to the board in November, while reelecting incumbent Diane Arnold.

“The biggest thing that we have as a board to do now, and probably in some ways the hardest, is to develop among ourselves and with stakeholders in the community what success will really look like,” Hannon said. “Change for the sake of change isn’t going to get us anywhere. Right now we don’t have enough kids graduating or have enough school choice options in the community.”

Approximately 70 percent of Indiana school districts perform better in math and reading than does Indianapolis, according to the Global Report Card. Forty-two percent of students drop out of IPS. In 2012, the state took over four IPS schools because of persistent poor performance.

Policy Groundwork

The new board members campaigned on several reform ideas in a report released in December 2011 by The Mind Trust, an Indianapolis reform organization. The report sparked interest among parents and created election momentum, said Larry Grau, state director of Indiana Democrats for Education Reform (DFER).

“People saw what was possible in the school district, and it added a new dynamic to the elections,” Grau said. “People were looking for candidates who were open to new ideas and who were campaigning on the promise to bring change.”

Indiana DFER endorsed three candidates: Arnold, Cosby, and Hannon. Cosby said her experience as an IPS graduate, parent, and teacher worked in her favor.

“The public awareness of failing test scores and the recent loss of four schools to state takeover spurred an interest in electing candidates who are reform-minded,” Cosby said.

Bloated Central Office

School autonomy and improving pre-K education are top recommendations from The Mind Trust report. Hannon and Cosby named those top priorities in their campaigns.

“Increased school autonomy” would allow “administrators, teachers, parents, students, and community stakeholders to make decisions about what is best for their school and their students,” Cosby said.

IPS’s central office is needlessly large, expensive, and overbearing, said Mind Trust CEO David Harris. Attracting school leaders, extending school time, and allocating better resources to schools are key to improvement, he said.

A bloated administration is a common school district problem, and IPS is no different, Grau said.

“You have state and federal programs introduced, and the schools see the advantages of bringing those programs to the schools,” Grau said. “Those come with administrators, and they don’t go away when the programs go away, and you continue to pay for those administrations.”

The district’s layers of bureaucracy require “structural changes,” he said.

“IPS has done a very good job of training and growing leaders at the building level,” Grau said. “One way to send that off is to create a more autonomous environment where those administrators are able to lead. We need to have a board that focuses on not getting in the way of success.”

Follow-Through for Pre-K

Central office cutbacks could provide more funding for pre-kindergarten education, which is particularly important for poor and minority children, Harris and Cosby said. Research shows poor and minority children on average hear far fewer words spoken in their families than do children in middle-income families. This creates an early verbal gap that often never closes, and verbal ability is crucial to education.

“Pre-K is a means to become proactive in increasing achievement and closing gaps in achievement due to socioeconomic status and race,” Cosby said.

Even a billion new preschools won’t help children succeed if the city doesn’t first improve K-12 education, Hannon said, because even if preschool benefits children the benefits dissipate in later grades.

School Choice Momentum

“Like most states, we have charter schools that run the gamut in Indiana,” Grau said. “The board needs to be very open to what’s the best school model for the community that a particular building is going to serve. I think implied in the autonomy is school choice options. I don’t know if vouchers have been utilized to the degree they can be to provide opportunities for children and their families.”

Indianans tend to like magnet and charter schools, Grau said. Magnet schools offer specialized programs for gifted youngsters, such as a math and science focus, and charter schools are independently run public schools.

“Charter schools, by virtue of their design, have those attributes that we think successful schools have,” Harris said. “They’re clearly going to play an important role, but there’s no reason that district schools couldn’t be structured in that way.”

Cosby said her goal is to strengthen IPS so parents willingly choose to enroll their children there.

“It is every parent’s right to choose the educational option that is best suited to their child’s individual learning needs,” she said.

Hannon said she hopes the new board members can make “dramatic structural change” in their first six months on the job.

“I would like to see us on a very different page for the 2013–14 school year,” she said.

The new board members will be sworn in January 7.

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

INTERNET INFO

Newark Union Members Approve Performance Pay

By Mary Petrides Tillotson

Performance may soon affect teacher pay at Newark Public Schools, after local teachers union members voted to approve a new contract November 14.

Nearly 62 percent of member voters approved the deal. Two days later, Gov. Chris Christie (R) called it a model for the nation.

Schools in New Jersey’s largest city have struggled academically for years. NPS has a graduation rate of about 50 percent. The state took over the district in 1995.

Under the new contract, teachers will help evaluate their peers’ performance. Student test score gains also will matter, though the district didn’t say how much. Teachers rated “effective” will receive bonuses. “Ineffective” teachers will attend professional development.

Teachers who opt to staff low-performing schools or teach math or science also will receive bonuses.

“It has the potential to move the district forward in a lot of ways,” said Nancy Waymack, district policy manager for the National Council on Teacher Quality.

Donations from Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation will fund much of the $200 million agreement. The district must chip in $50 million, which Superintendent Cami Anderson declined to say how it would find.

Step Forward, Not Panacea

“It’s a step in the right direction, but I’m not sure it’s going to be the panacea it’s being touted as,” said Jerry Cantrell, president of the Common Sense Institute of New Jersey.

Districts should have started using performance pay long ago, said Terry Moe, a political science professor at Stanford University.

Because they engage “in the business of protecting jobs,” unions typically fight performance-based pay, he said. The ideal situation for the union is total job security regardless of performance or results, Moe said. But because of the state takeover, the union had a weak bargaining position. “This isn’t just any old district,” he said.

Having teachers evaluate each other will produce a fairer and more honest evaluation, Waymack said. Moe and Cantrell disagreed.

“Your friends aren’t going to say anything bad about you, but they might pick on a good teacher for not abiding by all the rules” such as working too many hours, Cantrell said.

Teachers often consider reviews a managerial role, so peer review protects them from management, Moe said.

Other districts employing peer review have found nearly all teachers receive satisfactory ratings and very few are fired for poor performance, he said.

Anything is better than not evaluating teachers at all,” he said. “But employer evaluation has just been a charade.”

Copycats Likely

The new compensation system makes NPS a more attractive place to work throughout a teacher’s career, and other districts are likely to copy Newark’s approach, Waymack said. The donations will make the transition much easier, she said.

Without the extra money, the union probably wouldn’t have supported the contract, Moe said.

“Even if you’re a poor performer, you don’t have to worry a whole lot,” he said.

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

Emergency Manager Law Overturn Troubled Michigan Schools

By Bruce Edward Walker

It’s getting more expensive for Michigan school districts to borrow money and difficult for some to avoid bankruptcy after voters rejected a ballot proposal that would have retained the state’s emergency manager law.

The law allowed the governor to appoint fiscal managers to oversee municipalities and school districts that have defaulted on loans.

Now emergency managers will function under an older, more limited law.

“Taxpayers should not be forced to bail out these irresponsible school boards,” said Kyle Olson, CEO of the Education Action Group Foundation, a Michigan nonprofit.

Gov. Rick Snyder (R) had appointed Roy Roberts emergency manager of the Detroit Public Schools, which has been near bankruptcy for several years. Before the election, Roberts said an overturn would likely make him resign, but afterward Roberts said he would stay at least until Proposal 1 was certified December 6. He has not addressed the issue since.

At the polls, 52 percent voted against Proposal 1. The vote overturned Public Act 4, which was enacted in May 2011. Public Act 4 proponents fear repeal will mean financially struggling districts cannot quickly address their biggest costs: employee salaries, staff bloat, and health insurance.

“The emergency managers are there because school boards repeatedly failed to fix the fiscal fallout of declining enrollment and overspending,” said Michael Van Beek, education director of the Michigan-based Mackinac Center for Public Policy.

Roberts’ position allowed him to save DPS approximately $82 million annually, he wrote the state treasurer in July.

After the election, Snyder asked state legislators to finish drafting a bill that would grant emergency managers more leeway.

“Taxpayers throughout Michigan are required to bail out cities and school systems that default on loans, and that is why these unions prefer bankruptcy to financial managers,” said Leon Drolet, chairman of the Michigan Taxpayers Alliance. “Bankruptcy equals bailouts that cost citizens across Michigan and may help government unions preserve the lavish benefits they feel entitled to.”

Bankruptcy lawyer Doug Bernstein told the Detroit News repeal means as many as 40 municipalities and school districts may face bankruptcy soon.

“Two things are certain: Emergency managers will be less able to erase these districts’ deficits, and legal battles will ensue over who gets to control instruction for children—the appointed manager or the fiscally inept school board,” Van Beek said.

Bruce Edward Walker was managing editor of InfoTech & Telecom News from 2010 to 2012.
Nearly Half a Million Students Enroll in Calif. Charters

By Joy Pullmann

As voters in Georgia and Washington stamped “approved” on independent charter schools, the state with the highest number of the publicly funded, privately run schools in the United States reached a significant milestone.

In late October the California Charter Schools Association (CCSA) announced 100 charter schools opened across California for the 2012–13 school year, surpassing last year’s 100 openings and bringing the total to 1,065.

Enrollment increased by an unprecedented 17 percent, or some 70,000 students, bringing the total number of California charter students to more than 484,000 since the state began allowing charter schools 20 years ago.

Approximately 2 million students attend charters in 41 states, according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

Obstacle Course to Success

The milestones are significant, considering the obstacles charters face in the Golden State, said Lance Izumi, education studies director at the Pacific Research Institute in Sacramento.

“It’s very tough to start a new charter school in California and next to impossible to convert a regular public school into a charter school,” he said.

Despite California’s 2010 Parent Trigger law, which allows poorly performing public schools to be converted into charters, teachers unions and school districts have blocked most attempts at such administrative transformations, Izumi noted, save the Adelanto Elementary School, where a judge recently ordered the conversion to go forward.

“School boards are often owned by teachers unions, and parents have to go through an appeals process—first, to a county board of education and then, if they’re turned down, to the State Board of Education,” explained Izumi, coauthor of the 2005 book Free to Learn: Lessons from Model Charter Schools.

Izumi says wherever charter schools have been established, they’ve proven to be “a very cost-effective and efficient way to deliver educational services to kids,” spending less money and having more flexibility than traditional public schools.

In January, the California Legislative Analyst’s Office released a report indicating the state’s direct-funded charter schools received at least 7 percent—or $395 per student—less general purpose funding in 2010–11 than their district counterparts.

Charter schools usually have to pay for facilities out of their operating revenues rather than from local property tax and bond revenues, notes Larry Sand, president of the nonprofit California Teachers Empowerment Network: “That’s definitely a savings for taxpayers.”

“It ends up costing less per pupil than it would for a traditional public school,” he said.

Academic Results

Besides being “extremely resourceful,” California’s charter schools are “highly successful and generating great results,” said CCSA President Jed Wallace.

CCSA’s 2012 charter school performance review reveals a U-shaped curve.

“There is an over-representation of schools under-performing as to expectations, relatively few schools in the middle, and a strikingly large number of schools on the right side of the U, way over-performing,” Wallace said.

However, he points out low-income charter students last year were five times more likely than their non-charter peers to attend a school in the top-fifth academic performance percentiles.

The association does call on an “authorizer,” such as a local school district, to end a school’s charter if it’s found to consistently underperform, said CCSA spokeswoman Sierra Jenkins: “This reflects the fundamental promise of charter schools in providing more flexibility and autonomy to serve kids in the way they need to be served.”

Charter school demand in California is high, with approximately 10,000 children on waiting lists in Los Angeles, where 40 new charter schools opened in fall 2012.

“Parents want high-quality choices, and our school district and superintendent have been very clear in wanting to work in partnership with them and teachers’ unions to serve students,” explained José Cole-Gutiérrez, director of the Los Angeles Unified School District’s Charter Schools Division, the country’s largest district authorizer. Its 230 charters serve some 110,000 K-12 students.

“We’re a district that recognizes the diversity of the city and do not rely on a one-size-fits-all model,” he said. “We want high-quality options for all students.”

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

The nation’s largest abortion provider will soon teach more public school students about sex, thanks to federal funding provided by the 2010 Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act.

For five years, the law earmarks $75 million for Personal Responsibility Education Programs, and Planned Parenthood Federation of America will receive much of that money, according to the Washington Times.

While Planned Parenthood’s national office declined comment and many local offices did not return calls or declined comment, Erin Zabel explained the ninth-grade program Planned Parenthood runs at schools in Newport News, Virginia. Zabel oversees education and external affairs for Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Virginia.

The federal grant will permit her branch to hire additional educators.

“We feel really fortunate to finally have a grant to significantly expand our department,” Zabel said. “You can’t ask young people to make smart choices about their lives if they don’t have all the information.”

Sex Positions in Kindergarten

While Planned Parenthood curricula varies, programs “ideally” begin as early as kindergarten, according to the federation’s Web site.

Zabel said the ninth-grade program is comprehensive and begins with emphasizing abstinence as the most effective way to prevent pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. The bulk of the program discusses contraception, diseases, and risks of sexual behavior.

“When kids understand what they’re up against, they’re less likely to engage in risky sexual activity,” Zabel said.

Some information is inappropriate to give earlier or at all, said Abby Johnson, a former Planned Parenthood clinic director.

“We saw in a couple different states last year that part of Planned Parenthood’s curriculum is to demonstrate different sexual positions with stuffed animals to children in kindergarten,” she said.

At least one program linked on the federation’s Web site suggests children ages 5 to 8 learn that “vaginal intercourse—when a penis is placed inside a vagina—is the most common way for a sperm and egg to join.”

Early Sex and Abortions

Planned Parenthood loses “a tremendous piece of its revenue base” if young people wait for sex until they are older or married, said Paul Rondeau, executive director of the American Life League.

Approximately a third of Planned Parenthood’s revenue comes from taxpayers, according to its latest annual report. Abortions contributed 14.4 percent of its $1 billion annual revenue. Twenty-three percent of its revenue comes from non-abortion health services such as contraception.

“We should be talking about contraception,” Johnson said. “And what’s the best way to do it?”

About half of women who have abortions were using contraception when they got pregnant, she said.

“Telling the truth about sexuality is so valuable,” Zabel said. “Biology and morality are so valuable, and why their bodies are so valuable, and why their sexuality is so valuable.”

Students are not told whether to use contraception or which kind, but instead are given information on the effectiveness of various methods.

“Obviously, once people have that comprehensive information, they can decide ‘for myself, for my lifestyle, this is the form of birth control that works for me,’” she said. “Most birth control has pretty minimal side effects or risks.”

Sex education should be more comprehensive than how-tos and disease charts, Johnson and Rondeau said.

“Sex education is not just about biology and pleasure … and its connection to human welfare, the family, the child, culture, is something that is best shaped by the families and their faith and their traditions, not by an organization that makes a profit by getting people involved in sex,” Rondeau said.

Parents should be given an opportunity to decide whether they want their children in sex ed and a look at the curriculum, Johnson said.

“Saying ‘don’t have sex’ doesn’t work,” she said. “Let [children] know why their bodies are so valuable, and why their sexuality is so valuable.”

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

EPA Is a Rogue Agency
The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is the nation’s leading job killer, implementing and enforcing laws that impose impossible regulatory burdens on American businesses. EPA has perverted the Clean Air Act by declaring carbon dioxide a “pollutant,” despite the plain intent of the law’s authors to exclude such naturally occurring gases, and despite major flaws in the science used to claim carbon dioxide endangers human health.

The Solution
Congress must rein in EPA through deep cuts in the size, power, and cost of the agency. Congress can repeal EPA’s authority to regulate carbon dioxide in the name of “global warming,” and it can demand cost-benefit analysis be applied to all environmental regulations.

The Petition
The Citizen’s Petition to Rein in the Environmental Protection Agency calls out EPA’s unscientific and destructive campaign to frighten people over the threat of man-made global warming and demands “deep cuts in the size, power, and cost of the EPA.” You can sign it online at www.heartland.org, or print out copies and fax signed copies to 312/377-5000, or mail them to us at The Heartland Institute, One South Wacker Drive #2740, Chicago, IL 60606.

You Can Help! By working together, we can rein in the Environmental Protection Agency! We can protect the environment without sacrificing jobs or our essential freedoms. Please help us by signing the petition today.
All aboard...for National School Choice Week!

Shine a positive spotlight on effective educational options for all children.

National School Choice Week is right around the bend! Whether you are participating in our Whistle-Stop Train Tour, planning or attending a special event, using social media to spread the word, or writing an opinion piece, now is the time to get involved and show your support for school choice.

Here are just a few ideas on how to get involved:

- Plan a rally - locally or at your state capitol
- Host a “Brown Bag Lunch” on school choice
- Arrange a community roundtable discussion
- Visit our website to learn the NSCW flash mob dance
- Promote school choice on Twitter using #schoolchoice

With your participation, we can make history! Already...

- 3000 events
- all 50 States
- 1 million students
- 500+ partners

To learn more, visit www.schoolchoiceweek.com