Advocates Discuss How to Stop Charters from Cannibalizing Private Schools

By Kathryn Shirley

Charter and private school advocates met recently to discuss research and anecdotal evidence on whether charter schools reduce school choice by siphoning off private school students.

“The reality is that charter schools are taking a good number of students from private schools,” said Joe McTighe, executive director of the Council for American Private Education (CAPE). In September, McTighe met with National Association of Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) President Nina Rees to discuss how to create a level playing field for all types of education opportunities, including vouchers and charters.

“We both want to ensure that families have access to a greater menu of schools that best suit the needs of our students,” Rees said.

Charter schools are public schools granted more autonomy in exchange for tighter accountability. Although both types of choice began in the 1990s, charters have grown more quickly than vouchers: 42 states allow charters, whereas 25 offer private school choice.

Since 2000, charter school enrollment nationally
Anti-Bullying Programs May Increase Bullying

By Joy Pullmann

A new study from the University of Texas-Arlington finds children who attend schools with bullying prevention programs are more likely to be bullied than those who do not.

Anti-bullying programs appear to teach kids new ways to hurt others and hide their activities from adults, said the study’s lead author, Seokjin Jeong.

“Usually people expect an anti-bullying program to have some positive impact,” he told a local CBS station, sounding shocked. But his study, which used data on 7,001 children in all 50 states, found either no reduction in bullying or an increase in bullying as a result of anti-bullying measures.

Since 2006, 49 states have enacted laws attempting to prevent bullying, although federal data and independent studies show bullying has declined since 2003. State officials recently instigated felony charges against two middle-school students under Florida’s new bullying law after a classmate they taunted committed suicide.

“The schools with interventions say, ‘You shouldn’t do this,’ or ‘You shouldn’t do that.’ But through the programs, the students become highly exposed to what a bully is, and they know what to do or say when questioned [about their behavior],” Jeong said.

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

Iowa Looks to Expand Choice

Continued from page 1

By Joy Pullmann

Assembly last year passed independent private accreditation so schools can be accredited by a third party. Transportation and textbook money became available, and homeschoolers came out with some great reforms.”

Private School Headway

Third-party accreditation should help private schools grow, Vander Hart said. A third party may be more sympathetic toward a private school’s mission without pushing stifling requirements as the state’s Board of Education is likely to do.

An October poll found a majority of Iowa voters support vouchers. The survey, commissioned by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, also found voters rate private and public schools similarly but 38 percent would like to send their children to private schools.

Though vouchers would offer more options, especially for low-income families, the state’s constitution says no one can be compelled to “pay tithes, taxes, or other rates for building or repairing places of worship, or the maintenance of any minister, or ministry.” That provision has kept vouchers on the back burner.

“Iowa has never attempted vouchers because of the legal challenges that could be brought forward,” Vander Hart said.

Education Savings Accounts

School choice advocates are turning to ESAs this session. The Friedman poll found more voters support ESAs than oppose them, preferring universal access over eligibility based on financial need.

Iowa Advocates for Choice and Education (IACE) is making ESAs its priority for 2014.

“We’ve been at the mercy of the Department [of Education] for a long time in Iowa, and it worked well until about ten years ago when the department began to get really hostile against private schools,” said Eric Goranson, chairman of IACE. “ESAs have always been empowering, … They are just the natural evolution [for school choice].”

The flexibility of ESAs, allowing parents to put money toward textbooks, private school tuition, home schooling costs, and therapy, seems to be a major draw for coalition partners, said Michael Chartier, the Friedman Foundation’s Iowa director.

Bringing ESAs to the legislative table this session will at least begin the process of educating members of the legislature and constituents about them, Chartier said: “It’s a good starting point.”

“ESAs have the ability to have bipartisan support, and I believe the governor will support them as well,” Vander Hart said.

Tax Credit Growth

Iowa has offered tax-credit scholarships since 2006, and a majority of those polled support them. The program gives state tax credits for 65 percent of donations to private K-12 scholarships.

Scholarship amounts have increased incrementally since the program was first introduced in the state. In 2013, LLCs were added to the list of organizations that could receive tax credits.

 “[Tax credits] are certainly effective for the parents and students involved,” Chartier said. “Certainly the demand seems to be there for a much larger program, since they seem to keep hitting their cap every year. The latest tax cap increase for the program was supported unanimously, completely bipartisan.”

Parents Want Variety

The Friedman Foundation poll found Iowa voters consider education a top issue. Seventy-seven percent said they were paying attention to the educational landscape in the state, but only 11 percent came close to estimating how much Iowa taxpayers spend per pupil: $9,800.

“We’ve been at the mercy of the Department [of Education] for a long time in Iowa, and it worked well until about ten years ago when the department began to get really hostile against private schools.”

ERIC GORANSON, CHAIRMAN
IOWA ADVOCATES FOR CHOICE AND EDUCATION

Fifty percent of those polled support charter schools and just 25 percent opposed them.

“There is a disconnect between voters’ school preferences and actual enrollment patterns in the state,” the report states. “Voters show a diverse range of schooling preferences.”

Vouchers are probably not on the near horizon, Vander Hart said, because “Gov. [Terry] Branstad has gone on the record saying he won’t support vouchers.”

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

LEARN MORE

How to Stop Charters from Cannibalizing Private Schools

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has grown about 17 percent per year, on average. Approximately 2 million students, or 4 percent of the school-age population, attended charter schools.

Charter students are typically drawn from nearby traditional public schools, but many leave private schools to attend new charters. In highly urban areas, students leaving a private school constitute nearly a third of new elementary-aged charter school enrollees, according to a study for the Cato Institute by Richard Buddin, a RAND Corporation economist.

“It makes no sense to let these [private] schools fade away,” McGhe said. “If charter schools put private schools out of business, we are diminishing choice, not increasing it.”

About 183,000 charter student were drawn from private schools in 2011 alone. Charter schools charge no tuition because they are public schools, but private schools cannot do the same or even come close unless students have access to vouchers. This has caused some private schools to close, and some worry such closures could diminish competition and diversity in the education system, especially since private schools generally achieve better results than charters.

In the District of Columbia, for example, the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program boasts a 97 percent high school graduation rate, and 91 percent of those students enroll in college. The graduation rate for DC charter schools is 80 percent, and its 57 percent for traditional public schools.

In many places around the country, only one schooling option is available. Those calling for pluralism are worried legislation favoring charter schools can have a devastating impact on other opportunities within the private education market.

Shared Goals
CAPE and NAPCS met to discuss two realities: Although charter schools are advancing choice and developing better school offerings within the public system, part of their success comes at the expense of private schools.

Both organizations want to increase the diverse, high-quality options available to students, their leaders said. Both also prefer legislation that would allow education funds to follow each child to his or her school of choice. That would create an equal playing field for all: charters, private schools, and traditional public schools.

“This could happen if the three sectors came together more often to talk about their challenges and goals and tried to leverage each other’s strengths and weaknesses,” Rees said.

Lawmakers also could enact voucher legislation in concert with charter legislation, as Indiana did in 2011, to reduce the anti-competitive effects of allowing only charter schools.

“Ideally,” Rees said, “every community would have robust district and charter schools for the future.”
Government Home Visits to Rise Under Obamacare

By Mary C. Tillotson

Thanks to Obamacare, states can receive federal grants to increase the number of home visits by government workers, raising concerns about further government intrusion into family life.

In existing home visit programs, social workers visit the homes of children in certain “at-risk” groups, aiming to improve family health and school readiness and decrease domestic violence.

“What they do once they get there, I don’t know, but at the very minimum it’s the government wanting to step in and tell you how to raise your kids, because if the government thought you could raise your kids on your own, they wouldn’t be sending busybodies to snoop around,” said Scott Woodruff, senior counsel at the Homeschool Legal Defense Association (HSLDA).

The Affordable Care Act mandates giving home visit priority to “high-risk populations,” meaning families that are low-income or have a history of interactions with child welfare services, child abuse, or substance abuse; families where children perform poorly in school or have developmental delays or disabilities; military families; and women who become pregnant before age 21.

“Those are target groups, but there actually isn’t any limitation on who could be visited, so a state could set up a program to visit every child, practically,” Woodruff said.

Potential Intimidation

Strictly speaking, allowing such visits is voluntary.

“The families enroll voluntarily and can discontinue services at any time for any reason without any consequence,” said Samantha Miller, a spokeswoman for the federal Health Resources and Services Administration.

But there’s no guarantee state officials and social workers won’t pressure or intimidate parents into permitting home visits, said attorney Kent Brown.

He offered an illustration:

“One of these [social workers] comes up to my door and knocks and we open the door, and they say, ‘We’re here representing a federal program and we’d like to talk with you,’” Brown said.

“Now, most people, seeing this, would be scared. Many of them would be intimidated, and the first impulse is to let them in the door. Now, is that voluntary?”

Incentive to Grow

The law pushes states to increase home visits, which could further pressure parents, Brown said.

“[States] have to show that they’ve made successful interventions, or if they have not, to report that. If the [Health and Human Services] secretary finds that they have not, they’re going to have to implement a corrective plan or lose the contract,” he said.

Increased participation bumps up statistics.

“Social service programs love to take parents and turn them into clients,” Woodruff said. “That makes the social workers’ statistics look really good. ‘Gee, I helped 100 people.’ If someone says, ‘No, thank you, go away,’ they can’t put that person in that category of people they helped.”

Using Vulnerable Moments

The program likely will be pushed on families in vulnerable moments—at the hospital when babies are born, at doctors’ offices, and at school, said Will Estrada, HSLDA’s director of federal relations.

“HSLDA isn’t saying there shouldn’t be home visitation programs if a family decides they want it, but … parents, not government bureaucrats, should be making the decision whether they need these services,” he said.

Some welfare programs require recipients to let social workers check in and make sure taxpayer money is being used properly.

“Be very careful about accepting government handouts,” Estrada said. “We don’t tell you not to accept it, but nothing comes free, so really look at the fine print. … Look at what you’re promising to do or agreeing to do in exchange.”

Fourth Amendment Protections

The Fourth Amendment protects citizens from “unreasonable searches and seizures,” and it’s important for families to know their rights, Woodruff said.

If officials do not have a warrant and there is no obvious life-threatening emergency, it’s generally best to send them away.

Social workers sometimes threaten parents with “we’ll take your kids,” Estrada said—a terrifying threat that’s typically empty.

“Where you’ve got these teams of people going out to people’s houses unannounced, how many of them are going to say, ‘Listen, I want a lawyer,’ or, ‘The Fourth Amendment protects my house, so stay away?’” Brown asked.

Mary Petrides Tillotson (mary.c.tillotson@gmail.com) is an education reporter for Watchdog.org.
Rhode Islanders Support School Choice, Poll Shows

By Mary C. Tillotson

Rhode Islanders want school choice and support vouchers for all students, according to a new poll.

“There is a broad-based support for giving families the option of sending their kids to the school of their choice,” said Michael Chartier, Rhode Island state director for the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, which co-published the poll.

He continued, “This crosses all parties, spectrums, [and] geographic diversity of the state. There’s a wide acceptance of school choice, and people see the need to make a choice for where to send their kids to school.”

About 21,000 Rhode Island students attend private schools, while 145,000 attend traditional public or public charter schools.

Given the opportunity, 54 percent of Rhode Islanders would send their children to a private school, the survey found.

Most Support Vouchers for All

Rhode Islanders also thought more highly of their local private schools than their public schools.

Forty-four percent gave an A or B grade to their local public schools, whereas 79 percent gave an A or B to their local private schools. Fifteen percent rated their local public schools D or F, while 5 percent rated local private schools D or F. Some respondents chose not to grade their local schools.

Of survey respondents, 62 percent said vouchers should be available, and 63 percent said vouchers shouldn’t be limited to families based on financial need.

“There’s this huge demand for the opportunity to send their children to private school, but they can’t access that,” Chartier said.

Researchers gathered the data in 602 phone calls this summer, and the margin of error is reported as 4 percentage points.

Democrat Leadership

Rhode Island has limited school choice options—a small tax-credit scholarship program and some charter schools—and it’s becoming increasingly difficult to have new charter schools approved, said Mike Stenhouse, CEO of the Rhode Island Center for Freedom and Prosperity, which co-published the survey.

In early 2013 state Rep. Elaine Coderre (D-Pawtucket) sponsored a bill that would have made almost 70 percent of Rhode Island students eligible for vouchers to attend private schools.

The bill didn’t pass, but school choice proponents say the state may be open to similar measures in the upcoming legislative session, beginning in January.

“We’ve already broken the dam,” Stenhouse said. “It’s not like the whole idea of choice is an anathema to Rhode Island. We have two small, limited programs, and that’s another reason we feel … a voucher bill might have a chance in the coming years.

“They’re all our school system, and taxpayers pay taxes to educate those kids,” he added. “It shouldn’t matter whether the taxpayer dollar goes to government schools, private schools, homeschooling. It shouldn’t matter, as long as we’re getting quality education. … If one segment provides better options than another segment, it’s important for those options to be provided.”

Mary Petrides Tillotson (mary.c.tillotson@gmail.com) is an education reporter for Watchdog.org. Reprinted from Watchdog.org with permission.
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Missourians Gather Signatures for School Choice Initiative

By Bailey Pritchett

Missourians are gathering signatures to put a school-choice proposal on the November 2014 ballot.

If they collect enough, voters will be able to choose whether to approve a 50 percent tax credit for businesses and individuals who donate to nonprofit organizations that “provide funds to improve programs in public school districts, provide scholarships for students to attend private or parochial elementary or secondary schools, or support special education services for children.”

The proposal is unique among school choice initiatives, said Mike Hoey, executive director of the Missouri Catholic Conference, because it would allow the organizations to allocate the money raised toward three causes: public schools, nonpublic-school scholarships, and special-needs programs.

“We’re optimistic,” Hoey said. “Oftentimes the benefits for public schools in school choice proposals are modest. But ours is not like that at all.”

Hoey says the nonprofit organizations will “easily” raise the cap amount of $90 million per year. Of the money raised, 50 percent would be reserved for public school programs, 40 percent for private school scholarships, and 10 percent for special-needs programs.

“This is how you win in most states,” Hoey said.

Seeking Signatures

Missourians for Children’s Education must collect 220,000 to 280,000 signatures in six of Missouri’s eight voting districts. The largest beneficiaries of the proposal will be young families with children in private schools and families with special-needs children. More than 100,000 children—10 percent of Missouri’s K-12 population—attend private schools.

Initiative organizer Barbara Swanson says she filed the petition because hard economic times have sapped Missouri families. Public schools are struggling on anemic funding, and private tuition is increasing.

Something for Everyone

Swanson thinks effective communication will be the proposal’s greatest challenge. “We have parts of the state that are more heavily Catholic,” she said. “It will be well received there. The other parts will be tougher.”

James Shuls, a Show-Me Institute education analyst, agrees the proposal is unique. “Tax-credit scholarships for private schools regularly get opposition by people like public school officials,” he said. “This one is deliberately appealing to them, saying, ‘Look, you’re getting the bulk of these funds.’ This proposal might get opposition, but not as much opposition [as in the past].”

EducationPlus, a cooperative of Missouri school districts, recently released a paper opposing tuition tax credits because they help students leave public schools.

Shuls said he expects to see negative responses from organizations like EducationPlus and teachers unions, but he agreed the initiative’s goal to benefit numerous parties might be the most successful approach for school choice initiatives.

“It’s hopefully a collaborative effort working together to help all children in the state,” Swanson said.


Pension Reforms Would Increase Teacher Pay, Freedom

By Joy Pullmann

Public pensions’ fiscal crises have become a hot topic, but two simple pension reforms would mean more money and more freedom for current and future teachers without costing taxpayers another dime, says a new study.

The Manhattan Institute report by Josh McGee and Marcus Winters describes two reforms: let teachers accrue pension savings steadily throughout their careers, and pay teachers more directly through salary rather than through their backloaded pensions.

“The [current] system rewards long-term employees at the expense of shorter- and mid-term employees,” McGee said. “It takes a 25-year-old entrant into the [New York City] teaching system nearly 20 years to earn $50,000 in retirement savings. We’re harming those people’s retirement security.”

That same teacher, the paper notes, would earn another $550,000 in retirement wealth for sticking around another 20 years.

The paper examines the proposed reforms’ likely effects on the nation’s ten largest school systems. It concludes the two changes would raise teacher salaries, give teachers more control over their retirement, make teaching more attractive to people who may not want to work in the same district for decades, and offer teachers more control over their careers.

Many people don’t know teachers don’t earn pension benefits at a steady rate, Winters said. Teacher pensions, like most government pensions, typically commit very little money to beneficiaries until they have stayed in the same school district for at least two decades, then spike into comparatively high pensions.

This leaves most teachers with very little retirement wealth despite years of work, while the minority that stick it out in one place until the spike gets far more for retirement than a comparable private-sector employee.

Few Remain Two Decades

Winters says the disparity gets worse as Americans move more often. Currently, only 28 percent of teachers remain in the profession for 20 years, and not all of them remain in the same district, Winters notes.

“The percentage of teachers who benefit [from the current system] is a lot smaller than the percentage of teachers who are harmed,” he said.

In Los Angeles, the city with the biggest projected salary benefit from the pension reform proposals, an average teacher would earn 7.15 percent more each year.

“This problem is getting worse because people aren’t paying attention to it,” McGee said.

“People are committed to their local public schools. We’re trying to tap into that sentiment. Instead of pitting school funds against each other, we’re creating a partnership.”

Mike Hoey, Executive Director Missouri Catholic Conference

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


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Mike Hoey, Executive Director Missouri Catholic Conference
New Jersey Public Schools Said to Create ‘Apartheid’

By Kaitlyn Schallhorn

In New Jersey, 26 percent of black students and almost 13 percent of Latino students attend “apartheid” public schools where less than 1 percent of enrollment is white, according to a recent Rutgers University report.

“New Jersey’s Apartheid and Intensely Segregated Urban Schools” closely examines the “extreme segregation of many urban communities and their schools by race, ethnicity and poverty.”

The report found 8 percent of New Jersey schools qualify for its definition of “apartheid” schools. The Garden State has the strongest state law requiring racial balance in schools, coauthor Paul Tractenberg said.

Try Redistricting?

“Retaining New Jersey’s current crazy quilt of far too many undersized school districts and trying to promote racial balance by getting students to cross district lines is, as a practical matter, likely to be a limited remedy,” said Tractenberg, a Rutgers law professor. “Reorganizing our district structure, with racial balance as one of the goals, seems to me to be much more promising.”

Redistricting can create educational and fiscal efficiencies, he said, predicting “short-term increases in cost as the restructuring proceeds, but some longer-term cost savings once the growing pains have passed.”

Overall savings for redistricting are usually between 5 and 10 percent per year, he said. With New Jersey spending approximately $24.5 billion on education each year, among the nation’s highest per-pupil spending, “that’s hardly trivial, but it probably isn’t an immediate game changer,” Tractenberg said.

“Inevitable Result?”

Educational racial segregation in communities with a high minority makeup is the “inevitable result of assigning students to schools based on where they live,” said Greg Forster, a senior fellow at the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

Although Forster agrees extreme segregation reduces education effectiveness, he said consolidating school districts will place a larger financial burden on the state while handing over more control of education to the government.

“As more and more decisions get made by distant and insulated bureaucrats, the system just gets bloated and inefficient,” Forster said, noting the number of school districts in the country has shrunk to just 13,500 from 110,000 in 1940.

“Academic results have not budged an inch, but we are spending many times more per student on bloat. Consolidation doesn’t need to be accelerated; it needs to be halted and reversed.”

GREG FORSTER, SENIOR FELLOW
FRIEDMAN FOUNDATION
FOR EDUCATIONAL CHOICE

School Choice Solution

Forster advocates school choice as the solution to racial segregation. He says high-quality research shows school choice alleviates segregation while increasing academic quality. Gov. Chris Christie (R) and Sen. Cory Booker repeatedly advocate vouchers in New Jersey.

Creating larger school districts reduces competition among them, which degrades district quality, Forster said.

The New Jersey report sets arbitrary limits for success within districts by relying heavily on racial statistics within the districts without considering the racial makeup of surrounding communities as a whole, Forster said.

Kaitlyn Schallhorn writes from Washington, DC.

Bill Would Require Milwaukee to Sell Vacant Schools

By M.D. Kittlie

MADISON — Vacant Milwaukee public school buildings would sit idle no more under a bill proposed by two Milwaukee-area lawmakers. State Sen. Alberta Darling (R-River Hills) and Rep. Joe Sanfelippo (R-West Allis) introduced legislation to make old, empty school property in the Milwaukee Public School (MPS) District available to “education operators who are willing to turn the underused buildings into quality schools,” according to a news release from Darling’s office.

The senator said MPS is “cheating school kids” in failing to sell idle buildings to charter, voucher, and other parent-choice schools in the city.

“Great schools make for great neighborhoods. They increase home values because people want to move to those areas and raise their families. Vacant buildings don’t help at all,” Darling said in the release.

Under the bill, a building would be eligible for sale if designated as surplus, underutilized, or vacant on any resolution adopted by the MPS board within the previous five years. To prove a building is still in use, MPS would have to staff it and use it to educate children.

By M.D. Kittlie

WISCONSIN REPORTER

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“MPS is preventing numerous charter schools and private schools in the choice program from purchasing empty, unused school buildings. In doing so, they are directly blocking thousands of children from attending a nearby, high-performing school,” said C.J. Szafir, WILL’s education policy director, in a statement released in September. “And the City—by ignoring its power to sell these buildings under Act 17—is equally culpable.”

An MPS official claimed WILL has made false or misleading claims, telling Wisconsin Reporter the law does not require MPS to sell buildings for which it has legitimate plans.

That’s where the dispute lies: Just how many buildings are eyed for use by the district or others, and how many remain empty on the taxpayers’ dime.

“MPS is allowing buildings to sit vacant and deteriorate which is costing taxpayers tens of thousands of dollars,” Sanfelippo said in a statement. “They are depriving kids of the possibility of going to school in their own neighborhood simply because they may not like who could be running the schools.”

The two lawmakers said they are seeking cosponsors for the bill.

M.D. Kittlie writes for Wisconsin Watchdog. Reprinted with permission.
Oklahoma Drops National Common Core Tests

By Haley Stauss

Oklahoma students will not participate in national tests corresponding to Common Core K-12 standards. State Superintendent Janet Barresi cited high costs, technological unpreparedness, and parent and teacher concerns over the testing length as her reasons.

In 2010, 45 states agreed to trade their standards for Common Core. The next step is developing tests that track whether students are meeting the standards.

Two groups—the Partnership Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and Smarter Balanced (SBAC)—are designing two different sets of standardized exams to replace state tests in 2014–15. Twenty-one and 24 states will administer each test, respectively.

Oklahoma will remain a PARCC member state to retain a connection to the group’s “knowledge base” but it will not administer the tests, said Tricia Pemberton, an Oklahoma Department of Education spokeswoman.

Alabama and Utah also have dropped national Common Core tests.

Cost, Control Issues

Nonparticipating states may believe their standards are higher than the Common Core or worry the federal government is becoming too involved in education, said Andy Smarick, a partner at the nonprofit consulting firm Bellwether Education. “States have always done their own tests and have always had control at the local level. Some people equate national to federal,” he said.

The U.S. Department of Education tied grant money to Common Core and the assessments and awarded the two testing consortia $330 billion.

Technology and costs are a major concern, as PARCC requires states to administer all its tests online. Oklahoma was one of at least five states that experienced widespread computer crashes this spring when students attempted to take the test online. This invalidated thousands of test results.

“Oklahoma was one of at least five states that experienced widespread computer crashes this spring when students attempted to take the test online. This invalidated thousands of test results.”

Show Me the Money

Barresi said writing Oklahoma’s tests in-house, with its existing test development company, can save taxpayers $2 million each year.

That would duplicate federal funds already spent on PARCC, said Ron Dietel, assistant director of research and communications at the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards & Student Testing (CRESST). The two consortia have spent four years developing their tests, and now Oklahoma has only one year to do so, he said.

Delaying tests because of technical difficulties makes no sense because schools will need to update their technology to at least that level soon, Dietel said. “That’s the future. It’s like Edison and the light bulb.”

“Testing is a complex activity, more so than people realize,” Smarick said. Writers have to consider how many questions, how hard, and should they change as the student takes it to offer harder or easier questions, or should every student get the same questions?

He describes the students at either end of the bell curve: “How do we differentiate between the super smart kids? They might get all the answers right, but we won’t know exactly what they know. Do we ask more questions?”

Dietel said the way Common Core assessments measure students will be unique. It will be difficult to make a similar test.

Haley Stauss writes from Sacramento, California.
Obamacare Mandates Mean Cuts or Higher Costs for Many Schools in Minnesota

By Tom Steward

Thirty is the magic number in the Affordable Care Act for hard-pressed Minnesota school districts scrambling to avoid hundreds of thousands of dollars in penalties and new health coverage costs.

That’s the cutoff that triggers the ACA requirement for schools to provide health coverage to paraprofessionals, cooks, bus drivers, and other nonteaching employees working 30 or more hours a week. It’s also the number that triggers the so-called “pay or play” $2,000-per-worker Internal Revenue Service penalty for employers with more than 50 employees who do not provide coverage.

A Watchdog Minnesota analysis of Minnesota Department of Education data found 22,800 non-licensed school employees work between 30 and 39 hours a week, making them eligible for required health benefits under ACA yet vulnerable to reduced hours to get under the magic number of 30.

“It affects a lot of people, and some of those people are by choice part-time under 30 hours a week. Some of them are over 30 hours, and some of them already have benefits depending on the school district, full health benefits, and some have nothing,” said Gary Lee, associate director of management services at the Minnesota School Boards Association.

Thousands Affected

Minnesota school districts employ 63,000 non-licensed personnel. While teachers receive health benefits under collective bargaining, the state doesn’t track coverage for non-licensed employees, though it’s generally not considered a standard benefit.

About 22,000 non-licensed school employees, 35 percent of the total, work fewer than 30 hours a week and thus don’t qualify for medical coverage under the ACA. Approximately 18,000, or 29 percent, of the state’s non-licensed school employees work 40 or more hours a week, another pool of workers that must be covered if they aren’t already.

More than half of the employees working 30 to 39 hours a week are special-education paraprofessionals (12,500), followed by general instructional aides (2,600), food service workers (2,600), health service employees (1,075), and clerical and secretarial staff (1,025).

“The impact on paraprofessionals, they’re the ones as a group that I think would be most concerned because they’re right around that 30-hour mark,” said John Nelson, a tax manager with the accounting firm Eide Bailly who helps school districts determine their liability. “So a lot of schools are looking at that group in particular as an area that is going to cause some issues for them.”

Penalties Apply

The so-called “pay or play” penalty also applies to districts that currently provide partial medical benefits for those who work more than 30 hours. With more than 200 employees in that category, the Eastern Carver County School District calculated a potential IRS penalty for not extending qualified coverage at about $600,000.

“Currently the [school] administration is looking at how they want to proceed with either doing the increase with what we are contributing to their health benefits or if the district is willing to take the penalties, risking if someone were to go to the exchange, then we would pay the penalty. They’re kind of weighing all of those options,” said Laurie Zebell, benefits specialist at Eastern Carver County Schools.

One District’s Dilemma

In the Hayfield school district in southern Minnesota, there were no good options for addressing the quandary faced by 20 paraprofessionals and two secretaries working more than 30 hours a week.

It came down to spending $157,000 more to provide them with medical insurance, paying $132,000 in IRS penalties for not extending coverage, or reducing weekly work schedules to 29 hours to avoid the ACA requirement to provide medical benefits.

The school board voted in June to cut back the 22 employees’ workweek to 29 hours with a $1 an hour pay increase to help make up for their lost time and compensation.

“We’re trying to do first of all what’s best for our students, which are our customers, and from there make some wise decisions on how we can provide a good education without going bankrupt.”

GARY LEE, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF MANAGEMENT SERVICES MINNESOTA SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

“Unfortunately, we can’t raise our rates for education to help offset the cost of providing them with insurance,” Ron Evjen, superintendent of Hayfield Community Schools, told local media. “We don’t have the money in the budget to pay the fine or for the added health care cost.”

‘No Free Option’

In July, when the Obama administration announced a year’s delay in the employer mandate until 2015, Hayfield schools rescinded the shortened workweek. The same dilemma faced by the Hayfield school district confronts educators across the state and country.

“There is no free option in this whole gamut of choices that we have to pick from,” said Lee. “We’re trying to do first of all what’s best for our students, which are our customers, and from there make some wise decisions on how we can provide a good education without going bankrupt.”

A search of the Minnesota DOE Web site found no information or direction for school districts on health care coverage for non-licensed employees. No one there responded to a Watchdog Minnesota inquiry.

The Minnesota School Boards Association has begun holding seminars for districts to begin assessing their liability under the ACA. Although the employer mandate will not take effect until January 2015, identification of employees who qualify for medical benefits will take place in 2014.

In some districts, the issue will be part of contract talks with unions that represent some non-licensed school employees, including the Minnesota School Employees Association, Service Employees International Union Local 284, and Education Minnesota.

Tom Steward (tsteward@watchdog.org) is a reporter for Watchdog.org. Earl Glynn at WatchdogLabs.org contributed to this report. Reprinted with permission from Watchdog.org.
Colorado Overwhelmingly Rejects Schools Tax Hike

By Steve Stanek

Colorado voters on Election Day 2013 crushed Amendment 66, a ballot initiative that sought to raise the state’s income tax $1 billion a year to pour more money into K-12.

The measure lost by a 66.2 to 33.8 percent vote. “We congratulate Coloradans for having the common sense to reject this unnecessary and unjustified tax grab,” said Dustin Zvonek, Colorado director of Americans for Prosperity, in a statement. “Passing Amendment 66 would have gravely wounded the state’s economy and business climate, while rewarding a reform-resistant education system with an unearned windfall.”

He added, “Hopefully the governor and other leading liberals will take this as a clear message that Coloradans aren’t ready to see this great state Californianized. The debate over Amendment 66 erased any doubt that we have a typical tax-and-spend liberal in Gov. John Hickenlooper.”

Rejection of Progressive Taxation

Amendment 66 would have changed Colorado’s flat-rate income tax of 4.63 percent to a “progressive” two-tier system: 5 percent on the first $75,000 of income (an 8 percent rate increase) and a 5.9 percent tax on income above $75,000 (a 27 percent rate increase). Officials estimated the tax increases would have taken nearly $1 billion a year more from residents, making it the largest tax increase in Colorado history.

The initiative’s backers included some of the nation’s wealthiest individuals and politicians. These includ-ed billionaire Microsoft founder Bill Gates, who put $1 million into the Amendment 66 campaign, and New York’s outgoing mayor and billionaire news media mogul, Michael Bloomberg, who threw in another $1 million. Supporters of the failed measure outspent opponents more than 10 to 1.

Unforeseen Landslide Loss

“Selling a billion-dollar tax increase in Colorado was a tough task, but very few saw this kind of a landslide coming,” said Ben DeGrow, senior education policy analyst for the Colorado-based Independence Institute.

“Ten million dollars bought a lot of promises for education that supporters couldn’t keep, and some suburban voters undoubtedly were concerned that many of their tax dollars wouldn’t return to their local schools and classrooms,” DeGrow said. “The fact that the tax increase went down in flames also shows that Colorado voters understand the importance of TABOR [Taxpayers Bill of Rights] spending limits, and that peeling back constraints on the growth of government spending ultimately wasn’t good for the state’s children.”

DeGrow said the sound defeat of Amendment 66 gives people in Colorado a chance to start a serious conversation about real education reform. “That means curbing the power of unions and bureaucrats, giving families more quality options, and raising expectations rather than raising taxes,” he said.

Redistribution Scheme’s Demise

Earlier in 2013, Colorado legislators passed the governor signed Senate Bill 213, which would have raised annual state spending on K-12 schools from about $3 billion to $4 billion, imposed full-day kindergarten, and implemented other changes in the public school system. But SB 213 needed approval of Amendment 66 for implementation.

Opponents argued SB 213 would have gutted local control of school districts and taken money from some school districts and sent it to others, depending on their relative wealth. They also said it was little more than a sop to the entrenched government teachers unions. Much of the additional money would have gone to teacher pensions, teacher and other staff hiring, and pay raises for existing staff. More than half of public school employees in Colorado are non-teaching staff.

One of the measure’s opponents was Penn Piffner, chairman of Kids Before Unions. In an interview with Americans for Limited Government, Piffner said, “The voters saw through this very extreme and unwise measure,” adding, “Clearly, Colorado voters took a very common-sense approach toward balancing government funding and family budgets.”

DeGrow said the Amendment 66 vote probably helped pro-reform school board candidates win in two of Colorado’s largest school districts, Douglas County and Jefferson County.

“Many fiscally conservative voters turned out in an off-year election to kill a large income tax hike and to support candidates who want to put kids before established interest groups,” he said.

Steve Stanek (sstanek@heartland.org) is a research fellow at The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
A lawsuit filed in Oklahoma County District Court seeks to have a special-needs scholarship program declared unconstitutional.

The case, Oliver et al. v. Barresi, takes aim at a program allowing Oklahoma’s special-needs students to access education programs of their choice. Under the Lindsey Nicole Henry Scholarship program, taxpayer dollars follow children to the school of their parents’ preference.

Plaintiffs seek a declaratory judgment to halt the program immediately and a permanent injunction against its operation as well as attorneys’ fees.

State Rep. Jason Nelson (R-Oklahoma City) said the lawsuit embodies “ideological hostility to the rights of parents to direct the education of their children.”

Nelson authored the law that created the Lindsey Nicole Henry Scholarship Program, named for a daughter, who died in her infancy, of former first lady Kim Henry and her husband, former Gov. Brad Henry.

Among other things, the plaintiffs contend the act violates Oklahoma’s constitutional provisions banning the use of government funds to aid any sectarian institution. The lawsuit further asserts the act violates the state constitutional requirement that the legislature establish and maintain a system of free public schools and a legal ban on making a gift of public funds.

Hypocrisy Among Plaintiffs

The first plaintiff named, Clarence Oliver Jr., is a professor at Oral Roberts University, a past education dean at the private university, and previously a superintendent in the Broken Arrow School District.

In a statement to Oklahoma Watchdog, Nelson pointed out Oliver is employed at a private institution that secured more than $380,000 in state scholarship funds through the Oklahoma Tuition Equalization Grant program (OTEG) in 2013–14.

“OTEG, Nelson said, is essentially identical to the Henry Scholarship program.

“If the lead plaintiff is so offended by the Lindsey Henry Scholarship Program, why has he not challenged the [Oklahoma Tuition Equalization Grant] law that he benefits from? I would be embarrassed.”

JASON NELSON, STATE REPRESENTATIVE OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA

Previous Failed Attempt

A previous lawsuit seeking to gut the law was filed directly against parents whose children were benefiting from the Henry Scholarship program. That lawsuit, filed by the Jenks and Union public school districts, was tossed out by the state supreme court in a 7–2 decision, but the court’s language left room for further litigation.

Forty-nine private schools have qualified for the program, which took effect in 2010. Between 250 and 300 children receive the scholarships.

Plaintiffs object to the program because 43 of the institutions eligible to receive funds are faith-based schools.

“None of [the plaintiffs] is facing the very real circumstances faced by parents of more than 200 children who use the Henry Scholarship program because the needs of their children were not being met [in public schools],” Nelson said. “None of the plaintiffs in this case have demonstrated any interest or willingness to address the legitimate concerns expressed about challenges [these families face] in public schools.”

Patrick McGuigan (pmcguigan@watchdog.org) is a reporter for Watchdog.org, which originally published this article. Reprinted with permission.
North Carolina Officials Backtrack on Plans to Inspect Homeschools

By Bailey Pritchett

North Carolina homeschool parents erupted in anger when David Mills, director of the state’s Department of Non-Public Education, said he planned to randomly visit homeschools across the state for “review of tests results, immunization records, and attendance records showing that schools have operated for nine months.”

Although state law requires annual inspections of school records, parents complained the visits would violate the Fourth Amendment, which forbids warrantless searches of private property.

“Homeschool families should follow the law relating to the keeping of records and their lawful inspection, but should not be compelled to let any government official into their house.”

DAN FOREST
LT. GOVERNOR - NORTH CAROLINA

“Senate Bill 5901, sponsored by state Sens. Steve Litzow (R-Mercer Island) and Rodney Tom (D-Medina), would have allowed school districts to pay successful teachers more.”

By Kathryn Shirley

The 2013 National Teacher of the Year, a science teacher, earns less than 25,000 of his fellow teachers in Washington state simply because he’s been in the classroom fewer years.

Jeff Charbonneau teaches chemistry, physics, and engineering at Zillah High School. He is a National Board Certified teacher who has received numerous awards, including more than $25,000 for the ZHS Robot Challenge, which he founded and directs.

Charbonneau has taught for 12 years, but thousands of fellow teachers earn far more than he, simply because they have more seniority. Washington law makes teacher salaries dependent entirely on education credentials and years on the job.

“It doesn’t matter if you are bicultural with a special endorsement,” said Jami Lund, an education reform fellow at the Washington-based Freedom Foundation. “Our state system is purely egalitarian.”

National Recognition Meaningless

Each year for 16 years, teachers automatically earn a salary increase regardless of their performance in the classroom. With a master’s degree, which research consistently shows does not improve teacher quality, teachers earn even more and gain more protection from the possibility of a transfer or dismissal due to declining enrollment.

The National Teacher of the Year competition was established in 1952. The winner is chosen by a committee of teacher and school-related associations that are typically the same groups fighting against paying teachers for performance. In several states, for example, the coordinator for state teacher of the year is a teachers union official.

State winners become contestants for national teacher of the year.

Steps to Reward Excellence

During Washington’s most recent legislative session, lawmakers proposed reforming the current pay system by rewarding teachers for producing high academic success. Senate Bill 5901, sponsored by state Sens. Steve Litzow (R-Mercer Island) and Rodney Tom (D-Medina), would have allowed school districts to pay successful teachers more.

It also would have offered grants to districts that implement compensation systems based on performance.

Strong opposition from state teachers unions defeated those initiatives.

“We have made such limited progress after all this time because [unions] have been standing in the way,” said Stanford University’s Terry Moe. “Unions are right at the heart of the politics of education.”

It’s ironic the same teachers associations that gave Charbonneau a national award of excellence are also fighting against a twenty-first century salary schedule in Washington, Moe said.

Kathryn Shirley writes from Washington, DC.

History of Home Visits

Thirty years ago, when North Carolina legalized homeschooling, state officials visited every home and private school. Today there are more than 50,000 homeschool students in the state, so with its five staff members DNPE decided to conduct random visits.

The drop-in idea resurfaced in August 2013 when homeschool student Erica Lynn Parsons, 15, was reported missing after two years away from her home. Had she been under public school instruction, Parsons would have been reported missing more quickly. The story led some people to ask about the degree to which homeschoolers are held accountable, said Kevin McClain, president of North Carolinians for Home Education.

Mclain says homeschool parents should have welcomed the site visits to maintain their public credibility. Mills’ visits entailed an invitation to families when he visited a particular region of the state. If the meeting time he suggested was inconvenient, parents could decline. Mills told McClain he didn’t even need to go into families’ homes but could have their discussion on the front porch or in a neutral location.

Before retracting his planned visits, Mills had planned to start with five homeschool families.

Government’s Proper Place

McClain says Mills and the DNPE are the paradigm of good government in this case, not overbearing.

“I have a view of government people struggle with,” McClain said. “I think good government supports the good work of good people. DNPE actually behaves like public servants.”

McClain said he was not surprised by Forest’s negative reaction, since Forest is also a homeschool parent, but he was surprised about the lieutenant governor’s strong statements.

Although he recognizes the need for healthy skepticism of an intrusive government, McClain says DNPE is an exception to the rule.

“There is a long history of positive and respectful relationship between homeschool families and the] DNPE,” McClain said. “These officials are good. They are deeply invested in the right and freedom to pursue practice that is best for their kids.”

Wisconsin Legislature Takes a Fresh Look at Charter Schools

By Ashley Bateman

State Sen. Alberta Darling has proposed a measure to increase the number of independent charters in Wisconsin and allow self-replication by the highest-performing charter schools.

Because most Wisconsin charters must be approved by their competitors, local school districts, the alternative public schools are almost at a stand-still outside of Milwaukee, said Carrie Bonk, executive director of the Wisconsin Charter Schools Association.

“Although school districts statewide have the authorization to charter schools, they have mainly only been doing so ... as instruments of the districts,” she said.

Of the 400 districts in the state, only 97 can authorize charter schools, and some are very small, rural districts, Bonk said. Districts typically either reject charter ideas or water them down.

“In both cases, the purpose of the innovation and flexibility is lost altogether,” Bonk said. “The need for multiple authorizers and expanding outside of the Milwaukee area and into the state is critical for independent charters.”

Overshadowed by Vouchers

“For the most part [charters have] been pushed to the back burner by the overarching school choice programs in the state,” said Christian D’Andrea, an education analyst for Wisconsin’s John K. MacIver Institute for Public Policy. “Especially with voucher expansion on the horizon.”

Mediocre education performance in Wisconsin public schools is bolstering some pro-charter arguments, he said.

“The biggest thing Alberta believes in is that parents should have a choice,” said Bob Delaporte, spokesman for Darling (R-River Hills). “We spend a lot of money to educate kids in Milwaukee, and we’re not getting the results we need. It’s the biggest city in the state, and we’re counting on those kids ... to be future leaders. We’re not doing them any favors by locking them into a school where they can’t succeed.”

Milwaukee is treated almost like an independent entity in the state, and many worry about expanding school choice outside the city, D’Andrea said.

Outside of Milwaukee, there are only eight charter schools not authorized by school districts, and half of those are online schools.

A ‘Back-Door’ Solution

Darling’s proposal, an amendment to Senate Bill 76, would allow Wisconsin colleges and universities to authorize charter schools in their school district or one in an adjoining county. It also would pre-approve requests to create additional schools by any charter school whose students score 10 percent or more higher than local district students two years in a row.

Bonk says the problem has been visible since Wisconsin first allowed charters 20 years ago.

“The last two legislative sessions we’ve been addressing the need whole-heartedly for independent authorizers,” Bonk said. “We know that replication has the support it needs, but multiple authorizers may not.”

Independent authorizers may take a backseat to high-quality charter school replication, which may be the best option in the state’s current education climate, D’Andrea said.

“It’s really difficult to push any kind of statewide authorizing board,” D’Andrea said. “Expanding that market is going to be very, very difficult. Replication is kind of a back door to get to that statewide authorization.”

Providing Quality Choices

Gary Bennett, Darling’s education policy advisor, taught for several years and participated in Teach for America before attending law school.

“It’s very important to not only provide choices to parents, but to provide quality choices,” Bennett said. “That means to replicate if [a charter school] has a proven track record and incentivize replicating by removing barriers.”

Creating as clean a climate as possible for effective operators to grow and produce a more laissez-faire environment for charter growth are key to educational improvement, Bennett said.

“Replication may be the first and best step,” D’Andrea said.

Complain About Funding

In Wisconsin, as elsewhere, opponents typically complain charters take students, and therefore education dollars, from traditional public schools.

“You can’t drain money from a public school to a different public school,” Bennett said. “Even if we accept the opponents’ argument, allocation is fixed. When we decrease, we would give less money to the charters than the public school district.”

Although negotiations are still underway, lawmaker support and the current committee hearing timeline bode well for the bill, Bennett said.

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
Vt. Public School Goes Independent, Angers Bureaucrats

By Mary C. Tillotson

When North Bennington Graded School closed its doors and the Village School opened in the same building, it looked like a win-win.

The public school had been stuck in a downward spiral—decreases in student population led to declines in state funding that required cuts in programs. The small Vermont community valued the local school, and there were rumors the state might consolidate the school with another town’s.

Local residents came together, closing the public school entirely and opening the Village School, a town academy operating under the state’s town tuitioning program, in which the state effectively pays tuition instead of funding schools and programs.

The option may not be available to other Vermont communities facing similar challenges.

Within the state Board of Education, Vermont Agency of Education, and legislature, some say the conversion abuses the tuitioning law and there’s no guarantee independent schools will provide local students with the education they deserve.

State Rep. Johannah Leddy Donovan (D-Burlington), who chairs the education committee, proposed a bill last year that would have prevented such conversions. The bill failed, but a study committee is expected to report its findings in time for the legislative session beginning in January.

Independent school advocates are gearing for an uphill battle.

Funding Follows Students

Although most school-choice programs—vouchers, for example—date to the 1990s, Vermont’s town tuitioning program began in 1869, the year Harriet Tubman got married and Leo Tolstoy’s War and Peace was published.

Today the population of Vermont is smaller than Detroit’s, and the state never has been a metropolis. In some towns, it didn’t make sense to operate a school because there weren’t many school-age kids.

Nevertheless, the state had to provide every child a free education, so it began tying education funding to students instead of schools.

If a town doesn’t have a public school, public funding follows the student to any public or independent school—including out-of-state and out-of-country—as long as the school isn’t faith-based. (Faith-based schools were permitted until 1961; three state supreme court cases later, they’re not.)

Some independent schools, called town academies, serve students the way a public school would. If a town agrees to make up the difference between tuition and baseline state funding, the school guarantees admission to local students.

Some Vermont communities didn’t build public schools because they already had a town academy. The oldest, Thetford Academy, has been operating since 1819.

Pushback from the State

Other schools have been considering conversions, says Mill Moore, executive director of the Vermont Independent Schools Association.

“IT always is very small districts where they’re feeling threatened, either by high costs or threats of consolidation, for example, but nobody has made any formal proposals at this point,” he said.

There’s an ongoing conversation about the high cost of education in Vermont and alternatives to the existing model, as residents feel the stress on their property taxes, Moore said.

Many in the state Education Department and legislature expressed displeasure with North Bennington’s conversion and are working to prevent other schools from following suit.

“I would still love to find a way to make it harder for a public school to do this. We have not yet found a way. I plan on maybe having a conversation with the attorney general to see if there is some way in which we could just make it more difficult or absolutely not allow,” said Donovan.

Last year, Donovan sponsored a bill that would have made independent conversion impossible for public schools. The bill failed.

Donovan says she opposes the conversions because independent schools may not offer everything students deserve, particularly special-needs students.

“We, as a community, all of us, regardless of whether we have children, we have a civic responsibility to offer our children a very, very excellent education,” she said.

She said she didn’t see any advantage to converting a public school, and any reform should be done by improving the existing public system.

Battle Ahead

Since Donovan’s bill didn’t pass, a summer study committee was commissioned to look into the financial impact of the state funding independent schools and the consequences of an independent school board not being publicly elected.

Robert Roper, president of the Ethan Allen Institute, called the committee a “farce.”

The study committee was unable to gather enough information to conclude anything, and Vermont Secretary of Education Armando Vilaseca will write the report, said Julie Henson, who sat on the committee and represented independent schools.

“There was no vote-taking on the summer committee, no recommendations made, and we never fully discussed the pros and cons of the things we were tasked to look at,” Henson said.

Vilaseca and Roper said there are strong feelings in the state education administration that independent schools shouldn’t get public funds. They expect the summer report to hit the fan in January when the legislative session begins.

“Every time you talk about school choice and see ‘Waiting for Superman,’ it’s always about an inner-city school that is imploding and totally dysfunctional,” Roper said. “The kids are failing, there’s metal detectors and drugs rampant, and we need school choice to fix that. That gains the most sympathy, but school choice works in the suburbs [too]. Vermont is where it is.”

Mary Petrides Tillotson (mary.c.tillotson@gmail.com) is an education reporter for Watchdog.org. Reprinted with permission.
Libraries Shift to Social Services, Away from Literacy

By Bailey Pritchett

One hundred thirty thousand letters meant $47 million for the New York Public Library.

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg recently proposed cutting the library’s budget by 18 percent and closing several branches. Even after limiting service hours in response to other budget cuts, NYPL now boasts the largest library budget in the country at more than $245 million.

The library released a statement saying New Yorkers, by writing to stop the cuts, had demonstrated their belief libraries are not a luxury.

Ninety-one percent of Americans 16 and older say libraries are important to their communities, according to a Pew Internet Research Center poll. Seventy-seven percent say free computer and Internet access at libraries is “very important.”

Many state constitutions have provisions claiming responsibility to promote literacy as essential to preserving a self-governing republic. In recent decades, however, libraries have shifted toward becoming social service and community centers instead.

Public Libraries Once Private

Like many major libraries, NYPL was not always tax-funded. In the mid-nineteenth century, New York Gov. Samuel J. Tilden donated his $2.4 million fortune to the city to “establish and maintain a free library and reading room.”

Eight years later, Tilden’s library endowment was combined with those of two other private New York libraries, the Lenox and Astor Libraries. Decades ago, philanthropists considered sponsoring libraries a way to help fellow citizens educate themselves.

Similar instances of businessman Andrew Carnegie’s “Gospel of Wealth” philosophy have dwindled with time, says Jami Lund, an education policy analyst at the Freedom Foundation.

“We used to have a sense of social responsibility,” Lund said. “There used to be a culture of success that was dependent on the community. Now there is a notion of delegation of individual responsibility to government responsibility.”

Although local governments are likely the most appropriate entities to fund and govern public libraries, Lund said, putting libraries under government control can create social discord because different groups value different things from them. Governments must attempt to accommodate everybody, whereas private institutions can set their own policies.

“They say that they’re using taxpayer dollars to give [taxpayers] literature,” Lund said. “That’s a great reason to have libraries. But there is no doubt that they are reinventing themselves in this digital world that is constantly changing around them. And that brings along things that taxpayers don’t want.”

Social Services vs. Literacy

Libraries have become centers for free Internet use in the past decade, moving books to make way for computer labs where patrons can play games and browse pornography, Lund noted. This often provokes complaints, but to comply with how courts have defined free speech rights, libraries that receive federal funding cannot filter their computers.

“You don’t always get what you sign up for when you want a library,” Lund said.

Libraries offer many free and valuable services, especially when times are hard, said Kathy Dunham, senior librarian of youth services at the Lacey Timberland Public Library in Washington state.

“Library use goes up during economic downturns,” Dunham said. “We try and be of essence to patrons. We fill a void where there’s a need.”

Lacey Timberland, NYPL, and many U.S. libraries offer assistance with tax forms, the English language, and practice citizenship exams. The Obama administration recently came under fire for asking the American Library Association to have librarians help people sign up for tax-subsidized health care.

‘Less Book-Centered’

Libraries are not purely educational, said Children’s Outreach and Programming Librarian Laurie Willhalm of Oakland, California.

“Part of our mission is outreach to families and children,” Willhalm said. “We’ve become much more community-centered and less book-centered—without getting rid of the books.”

In 2011, four branches of the Oakland Public Library began hosting free lunches for library visitors 18 and younger. This summer 11 of the 17 branches will participate in the program.

Similar free lunch programs have been adopted by libraries across the country, including Portland’s Multnomah Public Library and branches of the Chicago Public Library.

“The days of a librarian sitting at the desk, waiting for people to come to you, are gone,” said Dunham. “It’s all about reaching out to the community. It’s a big transition for librarians. We wear more hats than we used to.”

Kathy Dunham
Senior Librarian of Youth Services
Lacey Timberland Library

“The days of a librarian sitting at the desk, waiting for people to come to you, are gone. It’s all about reaching out to the community. It’s a big transition for librarians. We wear more hats than we used to.”

Partnering with Schools

Every January, LTPL hosts a book talk at every nearby middle school.

“We see every middle school student in the district,” Dunham said. “It’s not as flashy as the performances we pay for in the summer. But it gets kids reading.”

At the beginning of every school year, LTPL sends librarians to various elementary and middle schools to connect students with “good reads.” Outreach is a new task librarians have taken on over the past 50 years, said both Dunham and Willhalm.

“We don’t say ‘shush’ anymore,” Willhalm said. “The library is really a community center. These days our children’s sections tend to be loud.”

The policy question remains: Should taxpayers pay for whatever activities libraries conduct in the name of “literacy”? Lund asks.

“Does dissolving libraries and expecting people to be responsible mean that people will actually be responsible?” Lund asked. “It’s something to think about.”

Charter Schools Allow Freedom to Teach

By Ember Reichgott Junge

Public school teachers have a very challenging profession. Keeping young learners in their classrooms so engaged that they want to learn takes patience and enormous skill. But that is only a small part of what teachers can contribute to school success.

What if teachers could use their expertise and be held accountable for decisions regarding budgeting, staffing, curriculum, and team building? What if teachers were allowed to be the professionals they are?

When I was a Minnesota state senator in 1987, I had dinner with a friend who had left her job teaching science in an urban school district. She moved to the corporate office of a local health care entity. Had the money made her quit? “No,” she replied. “It was the freedom.”

My friend had grown frustrated with school administrators as she sought to implement her creative ideas in curriculum and teaching methods. “My ideas were not valued,” she told me. “I was not respected as an educator. I lost my passion.”

Creating Education Freedom

This was a pivotal conversation for me as I worked over the next five years to author the nation’s first charter school law in 1991 in Minnesota. As a union-endorsed Democrat, I wanted to create independent public schools and try new, innovative learning strategies outside the confines of a K-12 system unable to change.

Chartering was never intended for all teachers. But it was, and remains, a valuable option for some. Today charter school teachers are guiding more than 2.3 million students in more than 6,000 chartered schools in 42 states and DC. And more than one million names are on waiting lists to enroll in their classrooms.

Many teachers are surprised to learn that Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, was one of the first to propose a “charter school,” in 1988. He wanted to create a professional role for teachers. He envisioned the new schools as being led by teachers within school districts. Later that year, he told Minnesotans, “This is a system that can take its customers for granted.”

Yet teachers unions were (and still are) skeptical of charter schools, which typically operate outside district control. They vigorously opposed Minnesota’s charter law and those of many other states.

I’m grateful that now, after 20 years, some teachers and union leaders see new opportunities in chartering, coming full circle to Shanker’s vision. In 2011, Minnesota approved the first union-initiated charter school authorizer in the nation. The same union leaders who opposed chartering 20 years ago now sit on the authorizing board of the Minnesota Guild of Public Charter Schools.

Catalyst for Reforms

Chartering also has been a catalyst for other reforms in teacher autonomy. In 1994, a “Teacher Professional Partnership” was formed and owned by teachers. It enters into contracts with charter school boards in Minnesota, allowing greater teacher authority in exchange for school success.

That being said, other charter schools explicitly lay out areas of teacher autonomy (staffing, budgeting, curriculum) in contracts between authorizers and the school. Still others don’t offer teacher autonomy at all. But the possibility for innovation is always there.

This design change is showing results. Eleven successful examples of teacher autonomy in public schools, charter and district, are illustrated in Trusting Teachers with School Success, by Kim Farris-Berg and Edward Dirkswager. The authors conclude autonomous teachers emulate the nine cultural characteristics of high-performing organizations. They write, “[I]f we want high-performing schools, then the fundamentally different incentive structure of teacher autonomy is the design change we need. It’s time to trust teachers with professional authority in return for their acceptance of accountability for school success.”

Chartering is one pathway that allows this “freedom to be better” for entrepreneurial teachers. I encourage teachers across the nation to take a second look at chartering, not through the filter of past controversies but through the opportunity of gaining autonomy in return for accountability. For many teachers, there may be nothing more rewarding than having the freedom to help learners by doing what they do best.

Former Minnesota State Senator Ember Reichgott Junge (ember@visi.com) is author of the nation’s first charter school law and co-author of The Pioneering Charter School Story.
COMMENTARY

Texas Republicans Consistently Block Education Reforms the State Sorely Needs

By Jeff Judson

In Texas, more than 2,000 students a week are dropping out of public schools—3 million students during the past two decades.

This level of failure has occurred year after year, creating millions of under-achieving adults, and incarcerated criminals, as a direct result of a poor public school experience. No other issue better illustrates the dark side of Texas politics than this problem.

Consider that almost half of Texas African-American, Latino, and low-income public school fourth-graders score “below basic” proficiency in reading. That is below the lowest level of achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a test so well-regarded it’s often called “The Nation’s Report Card.”

Expensive, Ineffective Education

Among the 5 million Texas public school students, one-third of African-American and Latino students drop out before completing high school. In major urban areas, it approaches one-half.

But year after year, the Texas Legislature, with the help of rural Republican lawmakers, exclusively pursues more money, more regulations, and a bigger bureaucracy, instead of empowering parents with choices.

Over the past decade, student enrollment has increased by 19.7 percent while total education spending has increased by 95.3 percent, according to the Texas Comptroller. It is well documented that there is little or no correlation between aggregate spending and student achievement.

Republicans Kill Reforms

Each legislative session, urban Democrats and Republicans team up to pass legislation that will provide more choice to parents but are thwarted by rural Republicans and Democrats. Parents have no professional lobby.

State Rep. Jimmie Don Aycock (R-Killeen), the rural Republican chair of the state’s House Education Committee, was instrumental in killing most of the parent-empowering education reforms last session.

Among the least controversial of education reforms are charter schools. With 100,000 Texas children on the waiting list for a slot in a charter school, Aycock would allow only 10 new charter schools per year for the entire state. Other states—including California, Colorado, Florida, Maryland, New Jersey, and many others—have essentially no limits on charter schools.

School choice legislation—allowing students to escape bad schools and use the funds allocated to their education in a better private school—could not even get a hearing in Aycock’s committee. He also would not allow a vote in committee on a bill allowing “home rule” districts that would have freed good districts from regulations holding them back.

Refusing to Work with Democrats

State Sen. Royce West (D-Dallas) sponsored a bill to create Achievement School Districts, allowing the state to take over and turn around a district that was persistently low-performing, doing what was necessary to raise performance (including firing bad teachers). After five years the state would return control of the school to the original school district after it had improved.

The bill seemed assured of passage after it passed the Senate 26–5. Even state Sens. Wendy Davis (a Democrat running for governor) and Leticia Van de Putte (rumored to be running for lieutenant governor) voted “aye.”

Nevertheless, despite leadership from urban Democrat lawmakers in districts burdened with failing schools that needed it most, the bill was stopped on the floor of the House when the speaker upheld a point of order on a typographical error in the bill.

A Parent Trigger bill also passed the Senate 26–5 with bipartisan support but was stymied in the House by Aycock.

This legislation would have allowed parents of attending students to compel new school management by a majority vote if the school was low-performing for three consecutive years. The law, along with other school choice measures, has been implemented in other states in recent years thanks to a wave of bold Republicans and Democrats working together.

In Texas, however, parents and students endure the same failure year after year. Attorney General Greg Abbott has called school choice “the civil rights issue of our time.”

Indeed, it is.

Ohio District Stops Showing Film About Islam

By Joy Pullmann

A n Ohio school district has agreed to change its curriculum after a mother and public interest law firm filed public records requests related to several Islam-related materials.

In 2011, Jenny McKeigue’s son was required to memorize the five pillars of Islam for his seventh-grade world history class. She also requested the district remove a video titled “30 Days: Muslims and America” from the curriculum. At first, they refused.

According to the Thomas More Law Center (TMLC), the video features a Christian named Dave who decides to try Islam for 30 days. He lives with a Muslim family, studying the Quran and praying daily, where Dave recites lines such as “I testify that Mohammad is the messenger of God.”

A year and a half after McKeeigue’s complaint, the Olmsted Falls district has removed the video and stopped requiring the memory work.

“Teachers may not constitutionally show videotapes that violate the neutrality they must maintain toward religion,” said Richard Thompson. TMLC’s chief counsel. “Under the guise of teaching the history of Islam to seventh graders, history teachers were proselytizing students to the Islamic faith.”

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

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- Compelling results or substantiated conclusions that contribute to our scientific or scholarly understanding of the topic and inform policy.

KEY ISSUE SPEAKERS

ROD PAIGE
Rod Paige is a life-long educator and served as U.S. Secretary of Education from 2001 to 2005. As Secretary, Paige was an unstinting advocate of student achievement, employing “best of breed” solutions to achieve results towards the Department’s goal of raising national standards of educational excellence.

ALEJANDRA MIZALA
Alejandra Mizala holds an economics degree from the University of Chile and a PhD in economics from the University of California, Berkeley. She is Professor at the University of Chile with the Centro de Economia Aplicada (Center for Applied Economics), Department of Industrial Engineering. She has written articles, chapters in books and a book on a range of subjects including educational policies and Latin American labor markets.

JOHN F. WITTE
John F. Witte is the founding Dean at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan. His research interests include policy analysis, democratic theory, with specialties in education and tax policy and politics with current research on charter schools, open enrollment, and a longitudinal study (through 2012) of the Milwaukee voucher program.

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