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Chalkboard

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Some students are being denied access to the Washington, DC Opportunity Scholarship Program, which gives students from low-income families scholarships to attend private schools. Page 5

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Many Minnesota public school superintendents retire for a few days before taking back their former jobs — with full salary, benefits, and incentives — while drawing their pensions. Page 18

Walker’s Impact on Education
Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker has long butted heads with teachers unions. Supporters say his legislation has helped save money and improve education in the state. Page 16

W. Virginia School District Muscles Homeschoolers

By Bruce Edward Walker

Homeschooling families in Ritchie County, West Virginia have been subjected to a barrage of phone calls from the local school district intended to convince them to re-enroll their children in public schools.

Some parents considered the calls harassment, although none of the calls was characterized as threatening. While the school superintendent apologized by phone, the calls continued.

The parents said representatives of the school district superintendent’s office questioned parents’ qualifications to effectively instruct their children. Parents also were told their choice to homeschool their offspring would result in district teachers losing their jobs.

Homeschooling in the school district is important than test scores — 7

Three States to Tie Graduation to Common Core Testing — 12

Jindal Leads Legal Battle Against Common Core

By Sherri Kuhn

In a continued push to overturn implementation of Common Core standards and testing in Louisiana schools, Gov. Bobby Jindal joined forces with lawmakers in a lawsuit against Louisiana state education officials.

It’s the third anti-Common Core lawsuit Jindal has been involved with in a period of several months. Jindal filed the paperwork required to join 17 state legislators in a lawsuit they filed on July 21. The suit claims the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education failed to provide sufficient public notice, as required by law, of the state’s intention to adopt Common Core standards. The plaintiffs argue the public

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Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal addresses the 2014 Conservative Political Action Conference in Maryland.
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Anti-Testing Advocates Question Government Task Force

By Leslie Contreras Schwartz

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) has announced efforts to reduce high-stakes testing in public schools. Anti-testing activists say the proposals, though a good step, are not enough.

The council, comprised of state education officials from across the nation, announced in October it will partner with major school districts to assess the usefulness and efficiency of current tests, with the goal of eliminating those deemed unnecessary.

Members of the council are widely credited with being major players in the Common Core State Standards Initiative. The council’s website claims it launched Common Core along with the National Governors Association’s Center for Best Practices.

The testing review effort will include assessments of district benchmarks and formative tests. A press release from the CCSSO office says it will give reports to the public, but it offers no timeline for doing so.

‘Very Inadequate’

Monty Neill, executive director of the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, says the statement by CCSSO “is very inadequate.”

“There is far too much testing, and a couple with high stakes [are] causing serious damage to education,” he said. “[The task force] might modestly reduce testing, but it’s not backing off from the major cause, which is No Child Left Behind and waivers.”

Neill and other opponents of testing say the task force is responding to pressure from parents and teachers against the use of testing in public schools. Further evidence of anti-testing sentiment is H.R. 4172, the Student Testing Improvement & Accountability Act, introduced by Rep. Kyrsten Sinema (D-AZ) and Rep. Chris Gibson (R-NY).

Neill said the task force should include in its proposal elements from the Sinema-Gibson bill, which would require testing only in three grades and would end test-based punishments and sanctions in federal law against teachers.

‘Everybody Hates’ Testing

Robert Kimball, former Houston Independent School District vice principal and a grassroots school reform advocate, says he sees the move as a step in the right direction toward eliminating testing. Kimball’s book on dysfunction in the school system, Guns, Books, Lawsuits, and Civil Rights, will be released in December.

“Everybody hates it,” Kimball said about testing. “The kids hate it. The teachers hate it, the parents. Only the government supports it.”

The good news, he said, is the task force’s goal shows activists are creating change. “There are a whole lot of folks against [testing],” said Kimball. “There has been a lot of success by advocates and elected officials over the last ten years. And now the government is finally listening.”

‘Joy of Learning Is Disappearing’

The CCSSO proposal states schools will place less emphasis on test preparation and will require only tests grounded in college- and career-readiness standards.

That sounds like Common Core to teacher Marsha Griffin in Jonesboro, Illinois. She says all of Common Core standards and testing are detrimental to educating students. Her petition against Common Core standards and testing in Illinois had almost 6,000 signatures as this issue of School Reform News went to press.

“Due to the mandate to teach to the Common Core Learning Standards [sic], the pure joy of learning is disappearing across the educational landscape in classrooms in the United States,” wrote Griffin on the moveon.org petition. “We the undersigned believe that a one-size-fits-all educational approach is wrong for students.”

Kimball said he receives many calls from teachers who are leaving the profession because of problems with standardized testing. “They are being told what to do and what to teach, even if it’s not what the students need,” he said.

Assessing the Assessments

“I’m not sure what assessments they would come up with to assess the assessment,” said Zeph Capo, executive director of the Houston Federation of Teachers. He said he agrees with the effort to reduce the number of tests used inside the classroom.

“It’s quite harmful to students, as much as or more than to teachers, in that students are losing continuity of learning,” said Capo. He said most of the tests used in school districts are not used “in an appropriate way for teaching.”

“We are now testing four-year-olds, which is developmentally inappropriate,” Capo said. “We are turning kids off to learning.”

Leslie Contreras Schwartz (esliecon@gmail.com) writes from Houston, Texas.
Establishment and Pols Attacking Michigan Charters

By Tom Gantert

As the number of charter schools in Michigan reached a record 303 in the 2014–15 school year, the school choice movement has run into opposition advocates say is an orchestrated attack involving Democratic politicians, state Department of Education officials, and the state Board of Education.

On August 11, State Superintendent Mike Flanagan announced he had put 11 of Michigan’s 40 charter school authorizers at risk of suspension for alleged transparency violations and poor academic performance of schools they have authorized. Flanagan discussed placing a moratorium on any new charters being opened. Flanagan said he would make a decision by November, but hadn’t as this issue of School Reform News went to press.

“There has been a coordinated, all-out attack on charter schools in Michigan,” said Audrey Spalding, education policy director at the Michigan-based Mackinac Center for Public Policy. “Stop Playing Politics’”

Charter school advocates say the attacks are politically motivated. In 2013, there were 298 charter schools in Michigan, with 11,276 teachers. Only six of those schools are unionized, whereas nearly all traditional public schools are unionized.

Education funding in the state follows each student to whatever public school he or she attends. Each student brings approximately $7,250 in taxpayer funding to his or her choice of school. There were about 141,000 charter students in Michigan in 2013, meaning traditional public schools no longer get about $1 billion they would have received if they didn’t have to compete with charter schools.

Media Attacks

Some of the state’s media have participated in the attacks on charter schools.

The Battle Creek Enquirer wrote an editorial in November 2013 stating, “The people behind the charter school and privatization movement are intent on destroying public schools, and they are succeeding.”

An eight-day series in July 2014 by the Detroit Free Press strongly criticized charter schools. The newspaper alleged there was little accountability among charter school authorizers and questioned the quality of education at charter schools. One of the more controversial claims: that charter schools as a whole fared no better than traditional schools in educating students from families in poverty. That conclusion conflicted with the findings of a study released in January 2013 by Stanford University’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes, which found the typical student in a Michigan charter school gains about two months of additional learning in reading and math over the course of a year as compared to students attending a traditional district school.

‘Stop Playing Politics’

The Michigan Democratic Party highlighted the Free Press series in its fundraising material before the November elections.

From June to November 2014, Democrats in the Michigan legislature introduced 10 bills and two budget amendments designed to impose on charter schools more oversight and reporting requirements. In some instances, those measures would ban authorizers from creating additional charter schools.

“If there’s one thing parents could say to them, it would be to stop playing politics with our kids,” said Dan Quisenberry, president of the Michigan Association of Public School Academies, in an email. “There’s so much that needs to be done to improve education in our state, and they aren’t addressing any of that. Instead of concentrating on improving student achievement for all schools, they’ve pursued this agenda of putting politics first in an effort to eliminate school choice.”

Gary Naeyaert, executive director of the Great Lakes Education Project, said attacks on charter schools in Michigan are not in the best interest of taxpayers and not in line with what taxpayers want.

“While the vast majority of Michigan’s voters would like the legislature to address our crumbling roads, the House Democrats continue to mount a misguided crusade against parental choice and charter public schools. These priorities are inconsistent with what their own constituents are telling them,” said Naeyaert.

Tom Gantert (gantert@mackinac.org) is senior capital correspondent for Michigan Capitol Confidential, a daily news site of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.

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Teachers Versus the Public: What Americans Think about Schools and How to Fix Them is a comprehensive exploration of 21st century school politics. This book offers the first comparison of the education policy views of both teachers and the public as a whole, and reveals a deep, broad divide between the opinions held by citizens and those who teach in the public schools.

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Teachers Versus the Public: What Americans Think about Schools and How to Fix Them
Paul E. Peterson, Michael Henderson and Martin R. West
(Brookings Institution Press, 2014)
Low-Income D.C. Students Denied Scholarships

By Moriah Costa

Some Washington, DC children are being denied participation in the Opportunity Scholarship Program, which gives students from low-income families scholarships to attend private schools, despite a law giving preference to students with siblings in the program.

The Scholarships for Opportunity and Results (SOAR) Act, which reauthorized the Opportunity Scholarship Program in 2011, says students with a sibling already in the program are to be given priority. But that preference is denied for some families.

Penalizing Parents

Tiffany Jones, a fifth grader at St. Thomas More Catholic Academy, was denied participation in the program even though her sister, Sabriah, a seventh-grader at the academy, has received a scholarship for two years. The scholarship pays for Sabriah’s tuition, books, uniform, and saxophone lessons.

The children’s father, Gary Jones, a site leader at the finance company Duff & Phelps, said he was told Tiffany would have to wait at least four years for test results from a study group before she was eligible.

“I’ll say it’s a good program, don’t get me wrong, because it allowed us to put our children in better schools,” Jones said. “But to me it’s penalizing parents who have multiple students in the program.”

Jones took a second job as a part-time cashier at the downtown D.C. Marshall’s store to pay the $4,090 for Tiffany’s tuition and her clarinet lessons at the academy. Despite receiving a $1,000 scholarship from the Catholic Archdiocese of Washington and moving his family to a smaller, two-bedroom apartment, Jones is behind on his payments to the school.

“Even with two jobs, my wife is still not working, so I have to take care of the bills and everything else,” he said.

Because he works evenings three to four times a week, Jones isn’t able to spend as much time with his children as he would like or help them with their homework.

“I don’t get that time like I used to because a lot of nights when I come in they’re asleep, and then I see them in the morning when we head out for school and work,” he said.

Graduation Rate: 93 Percent

The scholarship program was established in 2004 to provide opportunities for students from low-income families to attend participating private schools. The fund provides scholarships of up to $12,572 for high school and $8,381 for elementary and middle school. Approximately 1,500 students were enrolled in 46 schools in 2013.

The program has a 93 percent graduation rate. By contrast, just 58 percent of D.C. public school students graduated on time in 2012.

The SOAR Act established control groups of students to track the progress of the program, but those study groups are no longer necessary, argues Kevin P. Chavous, executive counsel to the American Federation for Children and former member of the D.C. City Council.

“I think that the accountability and the evidence that the program works is clear,” he said. “Unfortunately, because of the politics of education, kids’ priorities are placed in the backseat, and we see that not just in D.C. but all over the country.”

KEVIN P. CHAVOUS
EXECUTIVE COUNSEL
AMERICAN FEDERATION FOR CHILDREN

“I think that the accountability and the evidence that the [Opportunity Scholarship Program] works is clear. Unfortunately, because of the politics of education, kids’ priorities are placed in the backseat, and we see that not just in D.C. but all over the country.”

Moriah Costa (mcosta@watchdog.org) is a reporter for Watchdog.org, where an earlier version of this article appeared. Reprinted with permission.

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was prevented from viewing the documents and voicing potential concerns.

**Change of Heart**

Jindal opposes the adoption of Common Core standards and tests developed by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), a federally funded, multistate group responsible for creating tests to assess student performance against the standards.

Jindal initially supported adoption of the standards by the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in July 2010. Some observers see his change of position as an attempt to woo voters in a potential bid for the presidency in 2016.

A Whiteboard Advisors survey conducted in July and August found 74 percent of “education insiders” believe Jindal’s reversal is politically driven.

In March 2014, Jindal began to take a stand against Common Core and PARCC. He focused his opposition on “one-size-fits-all” testing developed by PARCC, arguing it’s not the appropriate way to measure success. He urged lawmakers and the state board of education to address his concerns.

**One-Size-Fits-All Approach**

“Louisiana is a national leader in school choice,” said Brittany Corona, a researcher at The Heritage Foundation. “With the state’s course choice program, students are able to craft an education catalogue tailored to their learning needs by allowing them to take a combination of individual courses from colleges, public high schools, virtual schools, and private online providers. This customized education is threatened by one-size-fits-all approaches such as Common Core.”

By late April, Jindal’s opposition was heating up. He wrote an op-ed for USA Today in which he explained how his initial support of Common Core grew into opposition. “It is true, the Common Core standards did originally grow from states wanting to increase standards so our students can better compete with the rest of the world,” Jindal wrote. “Great idea. And Louisiana was in that group.”

He then noted the increasing involvement of the federal government concerned him. “I’m from the school that believes education is a matter best left for local control,” he wrote. “The notion of Washington determining curricula is something most states are simply not interested in. It’s a non-starter.”

**Fighting Back**

When the Louisiana legislature adjourned in June 2014 without reaching a decision on legislation drafted to stop PARCC and Common Core, activists pushed Jindal to continue the fight. The governor subsequently vetoed House Bill 953, drafted as a way to soften the impact of Common Core.

“Gov. Bobby Jindal is involved in lawsuits against the state and federal Departments of Education in an effort to fight this federal coercion of our education system and protect a student’s ability to receive an education that matches their unique learning needs,” said Corona.

She continued, “Currently 19 states have pushed back against the national standards by withdrawing or downgrading their involvement in the national tests and/or pausing the implementation of the standards. Four states, including Louisiana, have issued orders to exit Common Core completely.”

In a November 6 press release, Jindal said, “There is growing dissatisfaction with Common Core and we will continue to support every effort to halt the federalization of curriculum in Louisiana schools.”

BOBBY JINDAL
GOVERNOR - LOUISIANA

“There is growing dissatisfaction with Common Core and we will continue to support every effort to halt the federalization of curriculum in Louisiana schools.”

**INTERNET INFO**


Sherri Kuhn (sherrilkuhn@gmail.com) writes from Livermore, California.
Grades and Attendance More Telling than Tests

By Jenn Stanley

Researchers say much-emphasized standardized test scores may not be the best indicator of a student’s later academic success. Educators should focus instead on grades and attendance if they want to get their students through high school and into college.

According to a recent study by the University of Chicago’s Consortium on Chicago School Research, grades and attendance in middle school are far more revealing than test scores in predicting high school outcomes. The study looked at data from Chicago Public School students ranging from fifth to 11th grade.

The study shows just how important grades and attendance really are in middle grades, even though standardized tests remain the benchmark of academic potential in schools across the country.

Teaching to the Test
Kelly Hatton, a fifth-grade teacher at the Dulles School of Excellence on Chicago’s South Side, says tests measure only a single skill set. She worries prepping students for standardized tests takes away from much-needed lessons to raise reading levels.

“Standardized tests don’t reflect what my students do and do not know, because they just test their reading and writing ability,” Hatton said. “But since many of my students have low reading and writing skills, their scores are frequently very low. These tests are not indicative of their knowledge or potential.”

Hatton says it’s important to help students raise their test scores because the district holds tests in such high regard. Failure to pass standardized tests in middle grades could hold students back later on.

“What you really want to do is meet kids where they are,” Hatton said. “But it is in their best interest to do well on the test even if the time could be better spent working on foundational skills.”

Importance of Attendance

Although foundational skills may sometimes have to take a back seat to test preparation, Hatton says Chicago Public Schools recognizes the importance of attendance.

At the Dulles School of Excellence, which Hatton says is adjacent to one of the city’s most dangerous blocks, low attendance rates are a big problem. The school has implemented many initiatives to address the problem, including incentive programs and efforts to encourage community involvement.

Difficult to Predict

“The key takeaway with this study is that if you have students in the middle grades that are chronically absent, which means their attendance rates are less than 90 percent, or if your students are failing in those middle grades, it’s pretty likely that they are not going to do well in high school,” Gwynne said.

Ind. Voucher Program Continues Rapid Growth

By D. Brady Nelson

Preliminary reports indicate almost 30,000 applications were made in Indiana for school vouchers this year. The vouchers allow low- and middle-income families to use their child’s share of public education funding to send them to private schools.

Robert Enlow, president and CEO of the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, said, “Since 2011, the program has grown faster than any other voucher program every year. This is fantastic news for the many middle- and low-income families in the Hoosier state who are clamoring for more educational opportunity.”

Enrollment reportedly has risen by approximately two-thirds over the past school year.

“The rapid growth in the number of families participating in Indiana’s school choice program further demonstrates the demand for greater educational options,” said Jason Bedrick of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute.

He continued, “Different children have different educational needs. We should not expect that any one school will be able to best meet all the diverse educational needs of all the students who just happen to live in a given ZIP code.”

D. Brady Nelson (darren.nelson@me.com) is a Washington, DC-based neo-Austrian economist, writer, and speaker from Brisbane, Australia and Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

“Just because students were doing well in eighth grade doesn’t necessarily mean they’ll do well in high school,” Gwynne said. “But the path to high school graduation and career readiness begins much earlier than many people think.”

Jenn Stanley (jenn.m.stanley@gmail.com) writes from Chicago, Illinois.
strict increased significantly in the past school year, from 15 families to 45 families, according to homeschooling parent Susie Pierce. She attributed the spike in homeschooling to parental concern over the district’s adoption of Common Core curriculum standards and a decision to merge a local elementary school with a high school. She said the total number of homeschooled children in Ritchie County currently stands at 75 students. “We’re more irritated than intimidated, although at least one parent was invited to meet with the superintendent and another was told they might be in violation of the law,” said Pierce. “We don’t have the option of enrolling our kids in private school in our community, because there aren’t any,” she explained. “But we think our decision to school our children should be respected.”

Violation of Privacy Alleged
Superintendent Edward T. Toman announced at the October 13 Ritchie County School Board meeting his plan to spearhead a phone-call campaign. According to the meeting minutes, David Weekley, the district’s director of support services and attendance, reported the district “was down 6–12 students” from the previous year. He also stated there are 45 home schools in the county with 75 students being homeschooled.

The minutes state, “Mr. Toman shared the home-school procedures/policy with the Board. He said we will be making phone calls to reach out and see if we can get some students back.” Phone calls to Toman, Weekley, and Deborah Bever, director of Ritchie School District Special Education, Federal Programs, and School Improvement, were not returned.

According to Pierce and Michael Donnelly, an attorney for the Home School Legal Defense Association whose own children are homeschooled, Toman’s office inappropriately used confidential information. “Parents, by law, are required to supply contact information to the local school district,” Donnelly said. “To use their information that they’re forced to provide in the manner the school district did is completely a violation of these parents’ privacy.”

“Every homeschool family I personally know in Ritchie County operates under the notice of intent option,” Pierce told the board that evening from prepared remarks. “After the school board was contacted by our attorney in 2011 some of these things have been rectified, but this does show a pattern of past disregard for our rights.”

“Disregard for Rights”
“Parents, by law, are required to supply contact information to the local school district. To use their information that they’re forced to provide in the manner the school district did is completely a violation of these parents’ privacy.”

MICHAEL DONNELLY, ATTORNEY
HOME SCHOOL LEGAL DEFENSE ASSOCIATION
By Chris Neal

Colorado voters in November approved Proposition 104, a ballot measure requiring collective bargaining negotiations between teachers unions and school boards be open to the public. The measure, which received 70 percent of the vote, went into effect immediately.

“I think the legislation is important,” said Larry Sand, president of the California Teachers Empowerment Network.

“Traditionally, the taxpayer has been left out of the loop in these negotiations,” he continued. “Frequently, school board members are bought and paid for by the unions. Hence the union is, in a sense, negotiating with itself, with the public in the dark. Now, via this ‘sunlight’ law, the public will at long last be a party to contract negotiations.”

“Colorado already has sunshine laws that require school boards to do things openly,” said Ben DeGrow, a senior education policy analyst at the Independence Institute, which supported Prop 104.

“Prop 104 just expanded that to include teachers unions,” DeGrow said. “It sets a common ethical standard for transparency.”

Opponents Abounded, Failed

Though voters supported the proposition, several organizations pushed to stop it from passing.

One such group, Local Schools, Local Choices, describes itself as “a group of educators, superintendents, and other advocates who are “believers in transparency.” The home page of its website still displays the slogan, “Do Your Homework On Prop. 104.”

Among other complaints, the group considered Prop 104 to be a one-size-fits-all mandate that forces unions into the uncomfortable position of revealing their negotiating strategies before they are ready to make them public.

Other opponents of the proposition argued the decision to open negotiations should be made by local school districts and the unions with which they bargain.

The Colorado Education Association (CEA) donated $30,000 to Local Schools, Local Choices to oppose the measure. The union’s communications director, Mike Wetzel, said Prop 104 was unnecessary because several districts already had opened union negotiations to the public. He said CEA was supporting local control by advocating the decision to go public be made by individual districts and branches of the union.

“We recognize the voters’ preference and the importance of transparency in education,” said Wetzel. “But we believe it is a matter of local control.”

Is Transparency Too Expensive?

Wetzel also expressed concern that interpreting the law might end up creating a burdensome expense for school districts.

“I think there is going to be a lot of legal cost trying to interpret these things,” he said, “which is unfortunate, since Colorado is still recovering from the recession.”

DeGrow responded, “As for the costly lawsuits, I don’t know where they are going to come from, other than people or groups who have a vested interest in keeping things in the shadows.”

“Chris Neal (cdobro245@gmail.com) is a freelance writer based in New York, New York.”
Oklahoma Legislators Consider Steps to Cut Administrative Spending

By Heather Kays

It seems like such a simple idea. Oklahoma state Sen. Kyle Loveless wants to reduce administrative spending in schools and increase teacher salaries.

In the 2013 and 2014 legislative sessions, Loveless (R-Oklahoma City) filed a bill that would have consolidated administrative spending for more than 200 school districts with 250 or fewer students. He estimated the measure would save more than $35 million, funds the state could redirect to teachers and classrooms. He told School Reform News he was surprised when even conservative legislators resisted the idea.

State Sen. John Ford (R-Bartlesville), chairman of the Senate Education Committee, questioned Loveless’s cost savings estimate and suggested he convene a study group along the lines of the federal government’s Base Realignment and Closure process, under which a commission planned to increase the efficiency of the U.S. Department of Defense by realigning and closing military facilities. Ford said he wouldn’t hear Loveless’s bill without something similar.

In mid-November Loveless convened an interim study hearing before the Oklahoma State Senate Education Subcommittee on Appropriations.

“Today was just to look at all the efficiencies that need to be improved in public education so that we can get more tax dollars to actual teaching,” said Loveless.

The statehouse meeting room was standing-room-only when the subcommittee discussed Loveless’s measure, with many school district employees and interested citizens in attendance.

‘Tough Decisions’

Several superintendents from rural districts attended the hearing to learn about potential consolidation of services. Robert Trammell, superintendent in Snyder, said he agreed there was room for some administrative consolidation but he has serious concerns about cutting positions.

“It does look good on paper, because with a pencil you can push and erase and whatnot, but in reality, decisions have to be made, tough decisions,” Trammel said to Fox 25 television after the hearing.

Trammel and other superintendents said they are worried about local control being taken away and having the state, rather than local school boards, decide what geographical areas superintendents will cover. Trammel also expressed concern about potential logistical problems.

Trammel, who also serves as one of his district’s bus drivers, said he already covers a 350-square-mile district and that having responsibility over a larger area would not be practical.

Too Many Administrators?

One study discussed at the hearing found there were 5,733 unnecessary nonteaching and administrative positions in Oklahoma school districts in 2009. The report, written by Benjamin Scafidi and published by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, examined data from the annual editions of Digest of Education Statistics compiled by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics.

Scafidi found the number of students in Oklahoma increased 10 percent from 1992 to 2009, while the number of school personnel increased 25 percent. During that period, the number of teachers increased 24 percent and the number of administrators and non-teaching staff increased 28 percent.

In 2009 there were 49,907 administrators and other nonteaching staff in Oklahoma. Scafidi concluded 5,733 of those positions were not necessary.

If the number of administrators and nonteaching staff had changed between 1992 and 2009 at the same rate as enrollment changed, the state would have saved about $2.3 million a year, Scafidi found. The cost savings per classroom of 25 students would have been $8,886, and teacher salaries could have been raised by $4,924 a year.

Scafidi noted although staffing in U.S. public schools dramatically increased between 1992 and 2009, student achievement did not, as measured by graduation rates and National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores.

School Choice to Save Money

The possibility of using school choice programs as a way to save money also was discussed at the hearing. Several studies were presented by school choice proponents explaining the benefits of tax credit scholarship programs, charter schools, inter-district choice, and student-based budgeting.

One study discussed was a 2007 report by Susan Aud examining the fiscal effects of every school choice program in existence from 1990 to 2006. She found each of the programs, except those specifically designed to be revenue-neutral, produced at least $1 million in savings. Aud wrote, “In nearly every school choice program, the dollar value of the voucher or scholarship is less than or equal to the state’s formula spending per student.”

Participants in the hearing discussed a study by Scafidi that supported Aud’s findings.

In “The Fiscal Effects of School Choice Programs on Public School Districts,” Scafidi wrote, “research shows that all forms of school choice tried in the United States have led to improvement in academic outcomes for students who remain in public schools or have led to no effect on academic outcomes for students who remain in public schools. Thus, the evidence on academic outcomes is one-sided. Greater school choice does not harm academic outcomes for students who remain in public schools.”

Moving Forward

Loveless said the committee is expected to explore the issue further during the 2015 legislative session.

He stressed he has no intention of closing schools or laying off principals. Instead, he said, he wants the state to take smart and careful action to improve education in Oklahoma and ensure taxpayer money is spent as efficiently and effectively as possible.

“The issue here is duplication. If there’s just a little bit of waste, multiplied over 500 districts, that needs to be addressed,” said Loveless, noting Oklahoma currently has more than 500 school districts. “Looking at it and discussing it, and not just ignoring the problem, is what we need to do to move forward.”

Heather Kays (hkays@heartland.org) is a research fellow with The Heartland Institute and is managing editor of School Reform News.
Establishing a Parent Trigger by Lawsuit

By Bruno Behrend

In 2010, a small nonprofit organization promoted, and succeeded in helping pass, the nation’s first “parent trigger” law in California. The law created a petition process through which parents whose children attend a substandard school could change the school’s management.

Since then, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), parent trigger laws have been filed in 25 states. Seven of those states have passed some version of a parent trigger.

Under parent trigger laws, if half the parents whose children attend a failing public school sign a petition requesting reform, the school must shut down, become a charter school, or undergo one of two types of other reform. The concept was developed by the Los Angeles Parents Union, a group of self-described progressives led by Democrat Ben Austin. The parent trigger law passed by just one vote in the California Senate and one vote in the Assembly.

Not surprisingly, parent trigger laws have been criticized by school boards and superintendents, who don’t want to lose control of schools or students, regardless of how poorly the district does its job. State legislators, leery of union, district, and administrator political clout, have not been supportive of a child’s putative “right” to a good education.

With that in mind, ask yourself this question: “At what point should concerned parents have a cause of action against the government for failure to educate their children?” If they should have a cause of action, should they sue the state or their local district? Usually, courts consider the state as being responsible for education policy. However, when a child doesn’t receive a good education, it is usually the local district or school that has failed to deliver.

As you wrestle with these questions, it becomes clear a child’s “right” to a good education is an illusion unless courts are willing to enforce those rights. That is why the time has come for a judicial parent trigger, where parents simply demand courts enforce rights, regardless of whether the state legislature has passed a parent trigger law.

Precedents Established

This idea should not be considered controversial, as the apparatus and precedent for a judicial parent trigger are already in place.

First, special education is one area where parents are actively encouraged to exercise rights under special-education legislation. An Internet search for “special education law review” will yield a list of lawsuits from across the nation. If special-education students have a right to an appropriate education, don’t other kids have the same right?

The next set of scaffolding supporting a judicial parent trigger is the recent court decision in California in which the judge ruled teacher tenure laws deprived students of their right to an education under the state constitution and violated their civil rights. This case is being appealed by unions and the California political culture they purchased, but in the meantime it sets a powerful precedent establishing that education policy should focus on students’ access to education, and not the financial interests of public employees.

Another important element setting the stage for empowering parents to exercise rights is the advent of independent charter schools, which have grown in number over the past few decades. Once one set of children has access to a better school, it becomes increasingly difficult for the system to deny that option to children in the next block or ward.

For example, in Indianapolis a new law grants specific schools autonomy from district control, allowing the school leaders more control over curriculum and relief from collective bargaining agreements. Early results indicate those schools improve outcomes for students, with positive results developing very quickly.

Making the Right a Reality

Considering all the above-mentioned factors, it’s clear the time is right for parents to band together as plaintiffs and demand their children get the same quality of education that others in their city and state are getting. It is time for school districts incapable of providing a quality education (despite more-than-adequate financial resources) to lose education infrastructure, funding, and students to schools, teachers, and principals capable of providing a quality education.

The benefits of this approach are obvious. First, it circumvents the slow and compromised process inherent in waiting for legislation. Second, the action of filing a suit illustrates parental involvement. This negates the excuse parent trigger opponents use when they argue parents aren’t involved enough to decide school policy.

Finally, as more education options are made available to some but denied to others, the moral legitimacy of the system is increasingly open to judicial attack. If one area of Indianapolis has access to a good school, but another only one mile away does not, such a disparity should affect the conscience of the populace, as well as that of judges. This should lead to an increasing disregard for the increasingly weak arguments of the opponents of parental empowerment.

The time has come for parents to leapfrog the legislative process and stop waiting for stubborn legislators and governors to implement robust parent empowerment legislation. If the American child has a right to an education, that right has to be real, not illusory. If it takes a set of court cases to enforce those rights, the time to file them has come.

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3 States Rush to Tie Graduation to Common Core

By Loren Heal

Maryland, New Jersey, and Washington state are moving forward on plans to integrate Common Core into their education systems, tying graduation to student performance on Common Core tests.

Students who have not mastered Common Core material will have to find other ways to demonstrate high school proficiency and college readiness. They may be required to take a high school equivalency test from a state that has not adopted Common Core.

“In New Jersey, it’s actually one of a mix of alternatives, because of pushback against the governor,” said Robert Schaeffer, public education director for FairTest, the National Center for Fair and Open Testing in Boston. “We certainly expected that states that have graduation tests would begin phasing in the Common Core tests for that purpose, and that’s one of the reasons we’re opposed to the Common Core tests.”

Defining Readiness

High school aptitude and college readiness are not the same thing, says Michael McShane of the American Enterprise Institute.

“The real issue I see here is that colleges ultimately determine what is ‘college and career ready,’ not state K–12 standard setters,” McShane said. “I’m not convinced that colleges are going to see passing a Common Core-aligned exam as evidence of college readiness.”

“I imagine they are going to want some kind of third party—think ACT or SAT—kind of information,” said McShane.

“I’m not convinced that colleges are going to see passing a Common Core-aligned exam as evidence of college readiness.”

Michael McShane
American Enterprise Institute

Little Real Change

“We’ve long been opposed to high-stakes testing, both test overuse and misuse,” said Schaeffer.

He continued, “Common Core intensifies both of those detrimental educational trends by not at all reducing the number of tests that will be given or the consequences they’ll be given, like graduation, and replacing pretty bad tests with ones that are not much better, despite the promises of proponents that they would be a whole new generation of tests that went beyond the bubble and really assessed higher-level learning in a more meaningful way than multiple choice. Our position is: new tests, pretty much like the old tests.

“We support, as does the measurement profession itself, multiple measures in which you use a variety of factors,” Schaeffer said. “Primarily [among these are] the ongoing work that students do over time that demonstrates their knowledge, skills, and abilities to make educational judgments, kind of like the way they do in graduate school.

Schaeffer continued, “Even before Common Core, say last year, there were too many tests and they were misuse. Common Core added to the problem.

“The introduction of the Common Core-related testing has united folks on the right and libertarian end of the spectrum, with folks who have long criticized standardized tests who tended to be on the progressive side of the spectrum,” Schaeffer said. “We now have a very unusual alliance, a left-right agreement, that these tests need to be rolled back, and that is a politically powerful phenomenon.”

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Florida Parents Fight for Recess

By Diana-Ashley Krach

Lake County, Florida parents have fought hard for recess in their children’s schools, and it appears their work is finally paying off.

“Right now we feel that we have been heard by our superintendent and the [school] board. The superintendent issued a directive which provides a minimum of 60 minutes each week,” said Kristi Burns, one of the parents responsible for the Lake County Healthy Schools Facebook page. “Our hope is that the weekly mandate that we did get will turn into the daily recess we want, through our teachers.”

The directive issued by Superintendent Susan Moxley was in response to a rally organized by Burns and fellow parents in late October, which garnered national attention. Moxley said the amount of recess each class gets is at the discretion of each teacher.

Recess is important, says Lauren Rein, a kindergarten teacher for Baltimore County Schools in Maryland who has been a teacher for 25 years.

“Physical activity helps children of all ages develop gross motor skills, increases their focus during learning, helps them develop social skills and problem solving skills, and increases coordination,” Rein said.

Diana-Ashley Krach (krachkreative@gmail.com) writes from Lake Worth, Florida.
Many Missouri Students Forced to Accept Substandard Education

By James Shuls

In the wake of the tragic death of Michael Brown, Ferguson, Missouri has taken the national stage for all the wrong reasons. Segregation, poverty, police brutality; name the civil rights issue and, rightly or wrongly, Ferguson has become the poster child.

Despite all the ink spilled, few have taken note of a social justice issue that has roiled the local Ferguson-Florissant School District and the St. Louis area for the past year: school choice. No, students in Ferguson-Florissant are not clamoring to leave the school district for better options; others are begging to be allowed through the doors.

Missouri state law allows students from unaccredited school districts to transfer to the expense of their home district, to a higher-performing district in the same or adjoining county. Last year, approximately 80 students transferred to the Ferguson-Florissant School District from the neighboring, unaccredited Normandy School District, where Michael Brown attended high school.

Although academic achievement in Ferguson-Florissant is not exemplary, compared to Normandy it is a light on a hill. The Normandy School District received just 7.1 percent of all possible points on the state’s 2014 annual performance report, ranking the district last in the state. Meanwhile, Ferguson-Florissant received a score of 65.7 percent, enough for provisional accreditation.

Financial Strains

In all, roughly one-fourth of the 4,000-plus students in the Normandy School District transferred to 20 different public school districts in the St. Louis area. The Francis Howell School District was the largest recipient of Normandy students, with more than 450 electing to attend the higher-performing district.

Located approximately 20 miles west of Normandy in St. Charles County, Francis Howell is a highly respected school district. In 2013 the district received a grade of 96.4 percent on the state’s annual performance report. Despite the influx of lower-performing transfer students, that score remained virtually unchanged, climbing to 96.8 percent in 2014. According to data released by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, none of the receiving school districts saw significant drops in performance due to transfer students.

The transfer program, however, did create a significant financial strain for the unaccredited Normandy School District. State law allowed each receiving district to set the tuition amount for incoming students. In many cases, tuition was more than Normandy spent per-pupil on students within the district. Add to that transportation costs and an intractable collective bargaining agreement that made it difficult to right-size staffing to meet the demands of a smaller school district, and it is easy to see the law needed to be fixed to make it sustainable.

That fix did not come. In fact, after a series of legislative letdowns and bureaucratic bungles, it looked as if most of the Normandy students would not be allowed to return to their transfer schools this year. The state disbanded the Normandy School District and put in place a new, state-controlled entity. This allowed Francis Howell and the other receiving school districts to determine whether they would allow the transfer students to return.

Fighting Every Transfer

Although the receiving districts benefitted financially and were not harmed academically, several accredited school districts, including Francis Howell, denied the transfer students reentry. Enter attorney Joshua Schindler.

Representing a handful of students, Schindler sought and won a court injunction allowing Normandy students to return to their accredited schools. Most districts took the court orders to mean all students should be allowed to return to their transfer schools, but Francis Howell did not. The Francis Howell School District is requiring each student to get a court order before allowing him or her to return.

Schindler has now appeared in court 10 times representing groups of Normandy transfer students. To date, roughly 110 students have received court orders. If you count the districts that reversed previous decisions to reject Normandy students, the number of those allowed to return to an accredited school because of Schindler’s lawsuits has climbed to more than 400 students.

Trapped in Bad Schools

Unlike other urban school systems, Normandy does not allow students access to charter schools, nor is there a program enabling them to attend private schools through means such as vouchers or tax credit scholarships. Without the transfer program, the only way for a student in Normandy to receive an education from an accredited institution is for his or her family to move to another district.

In considering whether to grant transfer students the right to return to the accredited schools, Judge Michael Burton of the St. Louis County Circuit Court concluded, “Sadly, the evidence is crystal clear that the students will suffer if their request is not granted. Every day a student attends an unaccredited school [instead of an accredited one] he/she could suffer harm that cannot be repaired after the fact.”

Despite the continuing struggle of low-income families in unaccredited Missouri school districts to receive a high-quality education, few have joined the cause in support of expanding educational options. There have been no rallies, no protests, no marches in the street to demand justice for the students turned away from the doors of accredited schoolhouses.

It is a tragedy to subject students to substandard education simply because they live in the wrong ZIP code. Indeed, it can be the death of the American dream.

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Use of Blended Learning and Individualized Education Increases

By Ashley Bateman

Global demand for online learning is growing. In 2000, 45,000 K–12 students reportedly took online courses. Less than a decade later, the number had grown to more than three million.

Projecting from the increase in online course-taking in 2000 to 2009 in the K–12 sector, by 2019 50 percent of K–12 students could be taking online courses.

Six years ago the book Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns, by Clayton M. Christensen, changed the nation’s education landscape, introducing bold predictions about innovative technology driving individualized education.

Blended learning is commonly defined as an education program in which a student learns, at least in part, through digital and online media content and instruction, with some level of student control.

Christensen’s book notes the importance of personalized learning and logical approaches to introducing it successfully in American classrooms even as technology improves and use increases. He defines the pattern of disruptive innovation and its transformative effects on education.

“We know the prediction, we know what’s on the horizon, but how do we actually create it in a high-quality way?” asked Heather Staker, senior research fellow at the Clayton Christensen Institute.

Serves as a Design Guide

In October 2014, authors Michael Horn and Staker published Blended, a classical design guide to Disrupting Class.

and as Staker describes it, the “application [guide].”

“It’s apparent that districts and school leaders see the potential of personalized learning and using the Internet to provide access to opportunities that weren’t available before, but knowing where to get started is difficult,” Staker said. “The interest and demand have just skyrocketed, it’s proven to be a very fertile area for research.”

Blended cycles through four main concepts: understanding, mobilizing, designing, and implementing blended learning. The authors describe a variety of models currently in use and cite some of the most successful networks in the field, including Rocketship and Carpe Diem.

Video clips embedded throughout the text allow readers to access footage of real-life blended learning classrooms and educator discussions of implementation.

Implemented Carefully

Cristo Rey Network school San Jose Jesuit opened its doors in California’s Silicon Valley in 2014 after a successful summer bridge program used online learning to place and advance entering students.

Unlike other schools in the Cristo Rey Network, San Jose based its school model on a blended learning platform. Hiring the appropriate expert to map out a successful blended environment was key.

Blended Learning Director Francisco Castillo-Fierro spent a year collaborating with leadership and researching successful blended programs nationwide.

The most successful programs are student-directed and have collaborative, adaptive leadership guiding the blended environment, Castillo-Fierro said.

“Most schools have different approaches on how they enter the blended arena,” he said. “Some research and then have teachers try to develop on their own and come together with professional development. Other schools have third-party companies and implement best practices. … For us in particular, we wanted to be very student-centered in our model: agency, personalization, mastery, and relationships. Those are the four main pieces when we were creating our blended learning model.”

Targeting Outcomes

“I can see that in my past as a teacher, I was constrained by trade-offs. … Online learning offers the chance to custom-deliver learning opportunities matched to each student,” writes Christensen in his forward to the book.

The authors of Blended say they hope to reduce trade-offs and eliminate guesswork.

“I think as a community we’ve clarified our goals. We’re more attuned to the benefits of a more personalized system: One can tailor instruction to each student’s individual needs,” Staker said. “Today we understand that through good theory and good principles, we can innovate in ways that are less risky and more targeted toward specific outcomes.”

The book concludes with a blueprint for blended learning, and the authors’ note,

“Blended learning holds enormous potential to transform our factory-model education system into a student-centered design that captures the benefits of personalization, equity and access, and cost control. Although it is not a panacea, for increasingly antiquated schools—and the students in those schools—it’s an essential piece of the puzzle.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.aa@googlemail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.
By Tom Steward

Minnesotaians faced 39 school operating levy referendums on the ballot this fall, fewer than in any election since 1996. They nixed one of every four proposals at the polls.

Chalk one up for taxpayers? Not exactly. Many school boards had unilaterally raised school levies on their own long before Election Day, without seeking voter approval.

The 2013 Minnesota Legislature gave school boards the authority to go behind the backs of local taxpayers who decline to raise their school taxes.

“The argument is the school board is locally elected and if the citizens don’t like what the school board does, they can vote them out of office and reverse the referendum decision that they made,” said Tom Melcher, director of school finance at the Minnesota Department of Education.

Is It a Referendum?

Educators still call it a “referendum,” but school board members now cast the only votes in deciding whether to impose an operating levy of up to $300 per pupil for five years without public approval.

“Given that the word is referendum, you’d think that yes, the levy authority is there because the voters approved it. But they didn’t, so we kind of have an oxymoron going here,” said Bob Porter, Minnesota Department of Education school finance specialist.

As school boards lined up to capitalize on their newfound power, the number of operating levy-free districts quickly plunged from 39 to nine. Only a handful of small, rural district boards resisted the temptation to up the ante on taxpayers with increased state aid as part of the equation.

“What the governor and the legislature have done is taken away decision-making authority that used to be in the hands of voters, instead giving it to school boards, allowing them to raise taxes or impose taxes unilaterally,” said Jonathan Blake, a Freedom Foundation of Minnesota analyst.

Ignoring Taxpayers

Altogether, 123 school boards have taken advantage of the $300 provision to initiate, increase, or convert their levy levels, Minnesota Department of Education figures show. Many property owners in districts statewide also will be assessed for a $424-per-pupil “local optional revenue” operating levy approved by legislators, rather than voters. Technically, school boards can opt out of the levy, but in practice they seldom do.

“The only way a district is going to generate less than the $724 is if the school board decides not to use all the levy authority that the legislature has provided it,” said Porter. “Why would they not do that? The two basic reasons would be they think they can operate effectively without that revenue or they figure they’ll never be re-elected, if they approve of it.”

Where does that leave residents of North Branch, an east central community where voters turned down eight straight school levy proposals? Taxpayers will be assessed based on an operating levy referendum of $724 per pupil next school year, once finalized by the school board. To offset part of the cost, legislators upped the percentage of state aid, which depends on a district’s property values.

With part of the board-approved increase already in place, North Branch has added 20 staff and resumed a Monday through Friday school week, after several years on a cost-cutting four-day schedule.

The tradeoff between less taxpayer control and more school board authority concerns at least one North Branch school board member.

“The majority of the people that voted me in there would not pass a levy because we’ve got a city that’s $62 million in debt,” said board member Randy Westby. “The real estate market is declining even now, when things are starting to pick up overall, because we’re too reliant upon property taxes.”

By Mary C. Tillotson

Washington state’s first charter school opened this fall, welcoming students from difficult backgrounds, including families touched by violence, drug abuse, and homelessness. A small number of additional charter schools are slated to open in the state over the next few years.

The state’s teachers union, the Washington Education Association, and others have sued the state in an effort to overturn the law, close the schools, and prevent new ones from opening. Hearings in the state supreme court began at the end of October.

WEA and its political action committee have donated thousands of dollars to state supreme court judges seeking reelection, according to Liv Finne, director of the Center for Education at the Washington Policy Institute.

“Opposition to the charter school movement in Washington pits teachers unions wedded to a broken, nineteenth century system of public education designed for an agrarian calendar against the integrity of an independent judiciary,” said attorney David Applegate, a policy advisor to The Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News.

He continued, “Who should win this should be obvious: When judges are seen as political actors to be elected based on policy preferences rather than as independent arbiters of legal disputes, and teachers value the established order over the education of their students, we undermine two essential underpinnings of a self-governing republic.”

Mary C. Tillotson (mtillotson@watchdog.org) is an education reporter for Watchdog.org, where an earlier version of this article appeared. Reprinted with permission.

Judges Given Political Contributions by Plaintiffs in Wash. Charter Case

By Mary C. Tillotson

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Mary C. Tillotson (mtillotson@watchdog.org) is an education reporter for Watchdog.org, where an earlier version of this article appeared. Reprinted with permission.
Walker’s Reelection Disappoints Teachers Unions

By Isaac Orr

Wisconsin teachers unions were faced with another disappointment as Gov. Scott Walker was reelected on November 4.

The unions generally supported Walker’s Democratic challenger, Mary Burke. Walker has been demonized for years by teachers unions due to the introduction and eventual passage of his Budget Repair Bill, also known as Act 10.

Union Furor

Act 10 sparked historic protests at the state capitol during which thousands of people filled the capitol rotunda. Many of the protestors were teachers who decried the bill as the end of public education.

Before implementation of Act 10, collective bargaining agreements dictated layoffs be based on seniority, not merit. As a result, newer teachers were frequently fired when budgets became tight. Megan Sampson, recipient of the “outstanding first-year teacher” award for English for 2010, was laid off by the Milwaukee School District because the school board’s collective bargaining agreement prioritized seniority and the union was unwilling to make concessions on health insurance that would have saved hundreds of jobs.

Positive Outcomes

Because Act 10 limited unions’ collective bargaining powers, school districts are now able to seek out competitive bids for health insurance plans. Previously, members of the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC), the state’s teachers union, voted on their health care plan, often choosing WEA Trust, an insurance company with ties to the union. This change in policy resulted in millions of dollars in savings for districts around the state.

For example, after opening its teachers’ health insurance coverage to multiple companies for bids, the Appleton School District voted to retain WEA Trust as its insurer but saved $3.1 million on the same health insurance plan because WEA Trust was forced to bid competitively for the contract.

Similarly, Kettle Moraine School District saved $600,000 by switching from WEA Trust to Humana, and the Baraboo school district saved approximately $660,000 by switching from WEA Trust to Dean Care.

Wisconsin state Sen. Frank Lasee (R-DePere) said, “Act 10 serves as an example to the rest of the country: An answer to successful education reform is not necessarily to increase spending.

“Common-sense reforms ... empower elected school boards by giving them the flexibility they need to keep and reward their most talented teachers, use the competitive bidding process to save money,” he said. “They prevent layoffs and do the most good for the most kids.”

Isaac Orr (iorr@heartland.org) is a research fellow for energy and environment policy at The Heartland Institute and a Wisconsin resident.

Tennessee School District Takeover Debated

By Chris Neal

Teachers in Shelby County, Tennessee are rallying against the proposed expansion of the Achievement School District, a state-run entity that moves the state’s lowest-performing districts into its jurisdiction.

The Shelby County Teachers Coalition staunchly opposes the ASD moving in, claiming it takes local control from the district and steals public funds, even though the ASD is itself a public entity.

The Fordham Institute’s Mike Petrilli says the coalition is self-serving.

“This is simply an example of adults trying to protect their own narrow interests at the expense of disadvantaged children,” Petrilli said. “The goal of the Achievement School District is to clear the bureaucratic and political barriers to making things work for kids. Done right, it’s going to empower local educators to do their work effectively, and will empower parents to have good choices for their children. That’s the kind of local control we should celebrate.”

Lindsey Boyd of the Beacon Center of Tennessee expressed concern over the district’s performance. Boyd says the ASD takeover would not change enough about the current system.

“Clearly, when a government school in Memphis watches over half their students drop out before reaching graduation or less than 6 percent perform at the required math standards, something needs to change,” said Boyd.

“Beacon has been very supportive of charter schools as a part of the larger menu of school choice options, but we also believe that enduring and positive change will only come when families are no longer trapped in one-size-fits-all education models,” Boyd added. “Until we allow parents the right to leave a school that’s failing their child and seek other options, whether that be homeschooling, public, private, charter, or virtual, we will continue to fall short of providing the opportunities Tennessee children deserve.”

Chris Neal (cdobro245@gmail.com) writes from New York, New York.
Program Assists Students Who Need a Little Help to Finish College Studies

By Jay Lehr, Ph.D.

Until only a few years ago, the public was largely unaware a large number of college students fall short of graduation for lack of relatively small amounts of money to pay a final year’s tuition or buy books or even to repair a car in order to get to class.

Perhaps for middle-income or more affluent students, the need of a few hundred or even a few thousand dollars would not seem an insurmountable obstacle. But to a student whose family earns less than $25,000 a year, a $300 need can seem impossible.

Previously there were no useful metrics to point out how close and yet so far many students came to earning a college degree. Recognizing this problem in recent years, the Northeast Ohio Council on Higher Education (NOCHE), which consists of the Akron Educational Community campuses of Kent State University, Hiram College, the University of Akron, Stark State College, and the Northeast Ohio Medial University, went to work using existing grant and scholarship funds as well as specific outside fund-raising to focus on this previously overlooked problem.

They were so successful that in October 2014 they beat out 56 other regions competing for a Talent Dividend Award of $1 million from the nonprofit CEOs for Cities organization funded by the Kresge Foundation.

Speaking on behalf of NOCHE, Hiram College President Lori Varlotta told the Weekly Villager newspaper on November 5, “Hiram takes pride in being a part of the region’s efforts to improve degree attainment. I am especially proud, however, of Hiram’s success in educating and graduating—in very large proportions—first-generation students, most of whom ultimately live, learn, and earn in Northeast Ohio.”

Small Scholarships, Critical Difference

The Success Scholarship awards went to students within a semester of graduation who had a small unmet financial need. These “completion scholarships” of less than $1,000 each made the critical difference in earning a degree for local college graduates over the past few years.

CEOs for Cities said the program provided the Akron Metropolitan Statistical Area 2,139 more secondary degrees than the area had four years earlier, the Villager reported.

Most universities focus on aid to students just beginning college with needs measuring in five figures, not a few hundred dollars for textbooks or money for a bus pass. The University of Akron has published online a 16-page Completion Plan aimed at increasing graduation rates.

The university’s publication recognizes “Barriers to Persistence and Completion,” acknowledging the difficulties inherent to a diverse population with 8,200 students attending part time and juggling work and family responsibilities. Eight-year graduation rates have been less than 15 percent. Approximately 33 percent of the students are first-generation college attendees.

Giving Students Options

Akron also has begun a “Finish on Time” initiative, to change the city’s culture through a communications and marketing strategy emphasizing that students who complete college on time accrue less debt and reach career goals much sooner. Akron also advertises “Help a Zip,” which offers help for students having personal or academic difficulties. Student support professionals provide assistance to students experiencing mental health problems, personal troubles, academic issues, or financial problems. The university’s sports teams are Akron Zips.

The Ohio schools participating in the NOCHE Success Scholarships program began with $10,000 grants from CEOs for Cities, and all found other foundations to match the grants.

Writing in The Wall Street Journal on October 30, 2014, Melissa Korn reported Kent State raised more than half-a-million dollars from other donors and has now given 380 students small grants of $250 to $2,000. Between 2011 and 2013, the University of Akron gave $47,000 to 75 students who had at least 100 credits and a 2.3 grade point average and had exhausted other options. The following year it gave grants averaging $1,265 to 167 students, most of whom graduated within two semesters after receiving the grants.

Korn also reported Georgia State University introduced a retention program in the fall of 2011 to help students financially. Seventy percent of the seniors who received the grants graduated within two semesters.

Jay Lehr, Ph.D. ([jlehr@heartland.org](mailto:jlehr@heartland.org)) is science director at The Heartland Institute.
By Tom Steward

In Edina, Minnesota, public school superintendents retire for a few days before they’re lured back for a sequel at their former jobs, with full salary, benefits, incentives, and pension.

Educators employed before July 1989 whose age and years of work experience total 90 years or more qualify for a pension. By technically retiring for as little as one day, they can collect both a paycheck and a pension simultaneously.

Edina Public Schools Superintendent Ric Dressen retired for a week in 2013. After receiving $96,000 in severance pay, Dressen was back in the office, again getting his $193,000 salary plus his $90,395 annual pension.

Widespread Problem

“It’s not just superintendents. It happens with principals and other leadership,” said Susan Brott, Edina Public Schools communications director. “I think when we know we’re going to have a big wave of retirements it’s a way to keep good people.”

Since the Edina educator’s contract is quadruple the state $46,000 earnings limit for beneficiaries, Dressen must defer part of his pension payment into an Earnings Limitation Savings Account for when he retires again.

“They receive the balance of their ELSA account at a later date, when they reach their normal retirement age,” said John Wicklund, assistant executive director of administration for the Minnesota Teachers Retirement Association. “No interest is earned while funds accumulate in an ELSA account.”

Double-Dipping

Critics consider the practice “double-dipping” by public employees who draw a taxpayer-funded salary at the same time as a pension. For unretired Redwood Area Schools Superintendent Rick Ellingworth, it means a $123,000 salary and $58,300 pension.

“They receive the balance of their ELSA account at a later date, when they reach their normal retirement age,” said John Wicklund, assistant executive director of administration for the Minnesota Teachers Retirement Association. “No interest is earned while funds accumulate in an ELSA account.”

“Even in the case of part-time consulting arrangements, it is a form of double-dipping. We should not allow districts or individuals to game the system at the expense of taxpayers.”

JONATHAN BLAKE, FREEDOM FOUNDATION OF MINNESOTA

Flawed Logic and Law

Sue Ann Gruver retired as superintendent of Prior Lake-Savage Area Schools on December 31, 2013. Two days later, Gruver was rehired in the same job at a salary of $160,000, peaking at $167,000 in 2017, along with an annual $62,840 pension.

“Minnesota law expressly allows eligible school administrators to retire, begin drawing their pension benefits, and then be rehired by their former employer or another school district,” said Kristi Mussman, communications director for Independent School District 719. “Dr. Gruver’s agreement was reviewed and approved by the school board’s legal counsel and TRA.”

Post-retirement benefits listed in Gruver’s current contract include total coverage family health and dental insurance, a $200,000 life insurance policy, $4,000 for a whole life insurance policy, $4,000 for a health care savings plan, 25 paid vacation days, 12 paid holidays, incentive pay of up to 4 percent of her $160,000 salary, $2,000 for a tax-sheltered annuity, disability and liability insurance, and a $600 monthly car allowance.

School boards often cite unretired educators as visionaries uniquely qualified to follow through with changes they initiated before retiring, such as Edina’s Next Generation plan.

“Going out and bringing in a new leader who would have to get up to speed, when we’re talking about some significant transformative kinds of changes in terms of how we do school, the board just felt very strongly they wanted to continue [Dressen’s] leadership,” said Brott.

Claims of Money-Saving

Schools make the case taxpayers actually save money because districts no longer pay into the “retired” employee’s state pension fund at the rate of 7.5 percent a year. But others say it is little more than an accounting gimmick.

“Districts often claim these arrangements save money, but what they really do is shift costs to the state’s underfunded pension system while essentially allowing double-dipping by some retired superintendents, principals, and teachers,” said Blake.

By rehiring superintendent Karen Orcutt for $188,000, Orono schools figure to save $37,000 in pension payments over three years. The veteran administrator also qualifies for a $103,800 pension.

“Had we chosen not to do this, the concern was that there were approximately 20 districts looking for a superintendent at that time; all would have been thrilled to offer a job to Dr. Orcutt. We did not want to risk that, and I am glad we did not,” Orono School Board Chair John Malone said in a statement.

The latest TRA figures, calculated for a 2011 St. Paul Pioneer Press report, show 5,700 pensioned educators were back in the classroom, mostly as substitute teachers earning less than $10,000 per year. The state does not track the number of unretired superintendents and administrators, but TRA officials say it’s not enough to weaken the fund’s bottom line.

“If you just look at it on the surface, I can understand somebody wondering what is happening. But on the other hand, there are no additional dollars being expended that would not have been expended for that person,” said Gary Amoroso, executive director of the Minnesota Association of School Administrators.

Tom Steward (tsteward@watchdog.org) is a reporter for Watchdog.org, where an earlier version of this article appeared. Reprinted with permission.
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