Mass. Reformers Get Common Core on Ballot

By Heather Kays

A grassroots organization successfully collected enough signatures to have a question regarding repeal of Common Core State Standards put on the 2016 ballot in Massachusetts.

In early December 2015, the grassroots organization End Common Core MA submitted 80,000 signatures already certified by town clerks to Secretary of State William Galvin’s office. The group needed 64,750 to get the Common Core repeal question on the ballot for the 2016 general election. If Galvin approves the signatures, the ballot measure would be submitted to the state’s legislature in January. If legislators fail to approve the ballot question, additional signatures could be collected in order to get the proposal on the ballot.

MASSACHUSETTS, p. 6

NCLB Replacement Bill Becomes Law

By Jenni White

After months of wrangling and then inaction by Congress, President Barack Obama on December 10 signed into law what some observers deemed a “behind-closed-doors” rewrite of No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

The Senate had approved the measure on December 9, while the House version was passed on December 2.

Dragged Out for Months

An earlier version of the House measure, the Student Success Act (SSA), was passed in July solely with Republican votes. House Democrats denounced the measure and Obama objected to several of the bill’s stipulations, including a provision allowing Title I funds to follow a child to the school of his or her choice, known as portability. Obama also objected to a provision that would have returned to the states many accountability measures previously overseen by the federal government.

REPLACEMENT, p. 8

President Barack Obama discusses the Every Student Succeeds Act December 10 before signing it.
We know: that’s a big headline. But the impact of school choice is even bigger. And, thanks to you, National School Choice Week continues to grow every year. Don’t miss the celebration in 2016! Discover how your organization can reserve a box of supplies — completely free — and shine in the positive spotlight of National School Choice Week 2016! Visit SchoolChoiceWeek.com/MyMeeting to learn more.
Why America Is Behind Europe on Educational Freedom

By Charles Glenn

The United States ranks among the lowest of Western democracies in government support for educational freedom, and particularly for the right of parents to select schools that correspond to their own religious convictions.

This principle, explicitly included in the international human rights covenants, is supported through public funding of faith-based schools in dozens of countries, including almost all members of the European Union. Despite voucher, tax credit, or educational savings account programs in a number of states, educational freedom is by no means the norm in the United States as it is in most comparable nations.

Although the rate of religious practice is considerably higher in the United States than it is in Europe, we have been much slower to recognize in a practical way the religious freedom right of parents to make decisions about the schools their children attend, and to do so without financial penalty.

School choice, a luxury for most American families, is taken for granted by Danish or French or Swedish or Spanish families. In the Netherlands, for example, only about 30 percent of children attend what we would call “public” schools, while the majority attend Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Islamic, or Hindu schools that are fully funded by government.

Europe Supports Faith-Based Schools

My book *Contrasting Models of State and School* describes how this situation developed in four European countries. Essentially, the aggression of secular elites during the nineteenth century, seeking to employ popular schooling for state-building and “social progress,” roused the common people into political activity.

The struggles were long and bitter; the Dutch speak of a 70-year schoolstridj, the Belgians of a lutte scolaire, but the outcome in these and other cases was a political settlement recognizing the autonomy of faith-based schools to express a distinctive perspective while receiving full public funding. One result is that there is now little conflict over schooling in these countries and the political parties of the Left, when in office, have not sought to establish a public school monopoly.

In the United States, by contrast, two factors have long prevented such a pluralistic educational policy, a process I describe in *The American Model of State and School*.

One was the fear aroused by Catholic immigration in the 1840s and after, abetted by reports of the struggles between the Catholic Church and republican governments in Europe. The other was the complacent assumption, in the absence of the sort of secular aggression that began much earlier in Europe, that locally controlled public schools were generically Protestant.

It was, in short, in response to aggression by what we would now call secular progressives in Europe that, through long political struggle, a dozen nations adopted policies protecting and financially supporting religious liberty in education. It was the former lack of such secular aggression in the United States, together with hostility toward Catholics, that for a century made such policies seem unnecessary to most Americans.

U.S. Faith-Based Schools in Danger

In recent decades, of course, the situation has been reversed. In highly secular European countries, faith-based schools continue to be publicly funded and are seldom attacked, while such schools live a precarious financial existence in the United States, despite the high level of religious belief and practice in American society.

Alarmingly, American faith-based schools also suffer today from secular progressive challenges to their personnel policies, accreditation, tax-exempt status, and in general to their ability to provide education based upon a distinctive understanding of the nature of a flourishing life and a just society.

Americans who value faith-based schools should learn from the nineteenth century European experience that only a determined social and political resistance, perhaps over many years, will vindicate the cause of educational and religious freedom.

Charles L. Glenn is professor of Educational Leadership and Development and former Dean of the School of Education at Boston University, where he teaches courses in education history and comparative policy. This article first appeared on December 22 at redefineED.
NYC Mayor Files Amicus Brief in Teachers Union Case

By Tom Gantert

In an attempt to thwart what would be a devastating U.S. Supreme Court ruling against mandatory union membership, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio filed a brief defending the claim labor unions have the right to force employees to pay “agency fees,” which allegedly strip out costs in dues not related to collective bargaining.

New York City joined a growing number of parties filing amicus briefs in the Friedrichs v. California Teachers Association case. The ruling is expected to determine whether public-sector union members must pay “agency fees” to the union. When setting agency fees, unions are supposed to take out any of the costs for activities not related to contract negotiations, so agency fees are less than the full union membership dues.

If the Supreme Court rules agency fees are unconstitutional, then union members would be able to opt out of unions without having to make any financial payments to it. Such a ruling would give rights to public-sector union workers similar to those enjoyed by workers in right-to-work states.

Steven Malanga, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a free-market research organization, takes issue with the city using the Taylor Law in its defense of agency fees. The Taylor Law was a “lousy deal for taxpayers,” Malanga says.

As an example, Malanga cites union negotiations with former Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Unions were unhappy with the deals Bloomberg offered during contract negotiations, and the Taylor Law allowed union members to receive raises in the form of “step increases” and to continue to operate under the expired agreements, Malanga says. This allowed the unions to hold out until a new mayor more favorable to the unions came into office and offered a better deal.

“That was entirely because of the features of the Taylor Law,” Malanga said. “There are some aspects of Taylor that are beneficial, but others that unions can exploit.”

Malanga says if the Supreme Court rules agency fees are illegal, the true degree of the public’s discontent with public-sector unions will likely be revealed.

Tom Gantert (gantert@mackinac.org) is senior capitol correspondent for Michigan Capitol Confidential, a daily news site of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.
Colleges Dropping Entrance Exam Requirements

By Heather Kays

A n increasing number of colleges and universities across the nation are dropping the requirement for entrance exams.

Bob Schaeffer, public education director at the National Center for Fair & Open Testing, also called FairTest, says abandoning entrance exams leads to a higher-achieving and more diverse pool of applicants. He says entrance exam scores do not accurately predict future student achievement.

“More than 30 colleges and universities dropped ACT and SAT admissions testing requirements this year, a [record annual] pace,” Schaeffer said. “An ever-increasing number of schools recognize that these exams fail to deliver on their advertised promise: predicting undergraduate success accurately and fairly with a tool that cannot be manipulated by high-priced coaching.”

Schaeffer says removing the entrance exam requirement can help students from low-income families who perform well academically to break out of the cycle of poverty.

“A large body of independent research, such as the landmark book Crossing the Finish Line, demonstrates that applicants’ high school grades, particularly in college-prep courses, provide better forecasts of their likelihood of college graduation than either the ACT or SAT,” said Schaeffer. “Moreover, relying on grades and other measures of real academic performance is much less likely to create additional barriers to access for groups that have historically been excluded from higher education.

“Test-optional policies are a win-win for both admission offices and the students they want to attract,” Schaeffer said. “Colleges that drop testing requirements get larger, better talent-ed, more diverse applicant pools, and teenagers know that such institutions will treat them as more than a score. That is why schools that become test-optional rarely turn back.”

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

Study Finds Online Charter Schools Lag in Student Achievement

By Ashley Bateman

Online charter schools need greater monitoring for quality, according to a report jointly released by Mathematica Policy Research, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), and the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO).

The groups’ “National Study of Online Charter Schools” analyzes the operations, policy environments, and student achievement impact of online charter schools across the nation.

According to the report, students in online charter schools significantly underperform when compared to their traditional public school peers. Online charter school students were found to be 72 days behind their peers in reading and 180 days, which amounts to an entire school year, in math.

“I think we had a sense, given the state accountability data, ... that there were some problems in terms of performance,” said Todd Ziebarth, senior vice president of state advocacy for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. “But we were alarmed by the results.”

Determining Achievement

There are approximately 200 online charter schools in the nation, and the sector is experiencing rapid growth. The Walton Family Foundation commissioned the study to explore the “strength of this educational option,” said Marc J. Holley, Walton Family Foundation evaluation unit director.

“We know that some students thrive in this setting, but the limited prior rigorous research on the topic certainly raised serious questions that needed further investigation,” Holley said. “We are very disappointed by the results and are calling on policymakers and operators to take strong measures to remedy the poor performance.”

“The three organizations were complementary in skills and took on different pieces,” said Robin Lake, CRPE director and coauthor of the report. “CREDO led the study of academic impact. Mathematica surveyed schools about their practices. CRPE studied the policy environment. We tried to pull all of these pieces together to get better insight into what the numbers showed.”

State Frameworks, Parent Guidance

The report found most states had low student achievement in online charter schools.

States should revisit their policy frameworks and address enrollment, attendance, funding, authorization processes, and personnel, Ziebarth says.

“Small district authorizers may not have the capacity to oversee [an online charter school],” Ziebarth said. “Maybe some of these schools should not be charters due to open-enrollment requirements. Maybe they need to redefine these schools with better enrollment criteria, screening for such a unique environment.”

Mathematica’s survey found teachers and students at online charter schools have live interaction as a “classroom” only three to six hours per week, significantly less than do students in traditional brick-and-mortar schools. As a result, the study found parents of students in online charters need to step in and guide a student’s educational experience.

Improve, Don’t Eliminate Options

“I think states are likely to continue to make the pathway available but significantly more regulated,” Ziebarth said.

“Thirty to 40 percent of kids are faring better in this environment,” Ziebarth said. “So it does work for some families.”

The best way to ensure full-time online education is available to those families who want it and can succeed in it is to require improvement, not eliminate options, Ziebarth says.

“I do think there’s need for more regulation, but it has to be thoughtful and careful,” Lake said. “We don’t want to close down the opportunity for publicly funded online instruction. We want to make sure it’s high quality and that kids can really benefit from it.”

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

"An ever-increasing number of schools recognize that these exams fail to deliver on their advertised promise: predicting undergraduate success accurately and fairly with a tool that cannot be manipulated by high-priced coaching."

Bob Schaeffer
Public Education Director
National Center for Fair & Open Testing

"We know that some students thrive in this setting, but the limited prior rigorous research on the topic certainly raised serious questions that needed further investigation."

Marc J. Holley, Evaluation Unit Director
Walton Family Foundation

"We would find many kids doing really well in this setting, but the limited prior rigorous research on the topic certainly raised serious questions that needed further investigation."

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"Thirty to 40 percent of kids are faring better in this environment, but the limited prior rigorous research on the topic certainly raised serious questions that needed further investigation."

Marc J. Holley, Evaluation Unit Director
Walton Family Foundation

LEARN MORE

Mass. Reformers Get Common Core Question on Ballot

Continued from page 1

Headlines—such as NPR’s “Massachusetts Drops Federal Common Core Test, Aiming At Its Own,” The New York Times’ “Massachusetts’s Rejection of Common Core Test Signals Shift in U.S.,” and PBS NewsHour’s “Massachusetts drops Common Core test, will develop own student evaluations”—have some parents and activists concerned the public is being misled into thinking the state is already dropping Common Core and the ballot initiative is not needed.

‘Just a Rebranding’
Media outlets inaccurately reported the state’s Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) voted to scrap Common Core-aligned testing. What BESE voted for was a hybrid test combining Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) questions aligned with Common Core and other questions created by the state. The undeveloped test, currently dubbed the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), or MCAS 2.0, should come to fruition by 2017, according to BESE.

Donna Colorio, chairperson for End Common Core MA, told School Reform News a hybrid test such as MCAS 2.0 would do nothing to improve education or address the concerns of parents, teachers, and taxpayers against Common Core.

“The hybrid test MCAS 2.0 that was voted on by the BESE is a Common Core-aligned test that will be using as much as 90 percent PARCC questions,” said Colorio. “The MCAS 2.0 is just a rebranding of the PARCC test.”

“The ballot initiative is more important now knowing that the teachers, parents, [and] citizens are being ignored. The End Common Core Massachusetts group has collected 110,000 raw signatures and 80,000 certified signatures since September,” said Colorio.

‘Parents Are Not Fooled’
Sandra Stotsky, a professor at the University of Arkansas who served as senior associate commissioner at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education from 1999 to 2003, where she was in charge of developing or revising all the state’s K–12 standards and teacher licensure tests, says parents must remain vigilant in the fight against Common Core.

“The only ones fooled were the media,” said Stotsky. “They know that the hybrid test will be PARCC because MCAS has to be based on Common Core’s standards, which are the state’s official standards.”

Stotsky was on the Common Core Validation Committee from 2009 to 2010. She was one of five members of the committee who refused to sign off on the standards.

The ballot question matters now more than ever, Stotsky says. “Parents know this hybrid scheme is PARCC in disguise. It was clearly a rebranding for political reasons.”

Previous Standards Preferred
Colorio says the inferiority of Common Core standards compared to the previous Massachusetts standards is apparent based on student achievement.

“The direction of this petition is clear,” said Colorio. “Frustrated parents and teachers signed this petition thanking us for working to restore educational excellence into the classroom. We oppose Common Core for Massachusetts because the standards are inferior, parents can’t help their children with their homework, the majority of teachers are opposed to Common Core, and our students’ scores as indicated on the most recent [National Assessment of Educational Progress] scores are dropping [since the implementation of Common Core].”

Massachusetts’s standards were widely considered among the best in the nation before the implementation of Common Core.

“Massachusetts has always been a leader in education, not a follower,” said Colorio. “By adopting the Common Core, we have failed our kids. Common Core is an educational paint-by-numbers; some students find it difficult, while others are bored, killing the creativity on all levels.”

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

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INTERNET INFO


Elena Creed, End Common Core MA, August 7, 2015: http://www.endcommoncorema.com/end_common_core_ma
Mass Grade Inflation Found in NYC Public Schools, Report Says

By Heather Kays

Grade inflation is rampant in New York City’s public schools, reports a new study by StudentsFirstNY.

Even though most New York public school students are failing state tests, they are receiving passing grades for coursework at their schools, according to the authors of “The Hidden Truth: Massive Grade Inflation Conceals Underperformance in NYC Schools.”

In schools where fewer than 10 percent of students pass state tests, 85 percent of students were passing their school’s coursework, the study found. This is not only happening in failing schools; it’s true for many of the city’s public schools, according to the report.

StudentsFirstNY is calling for an independent audit of school coursework in the city’s public schools to ensure it is teaching at correct grade levels.

“The findings of this analysis underscore why state test results play a critical check and balance function—it’s only by reviewing both school coursework and state test results that parents have the full picture of how their children are performing,” the report states.

‘Indefensible’ Policy

Derrell Bradford, executive director of the New York Campaign for Achievement Now, says the grade manipulation taking place in New York City’s public schools is indefensible.

“School districts build their myth of excellence on subjectivity and incompatibility of data,” said Bradford. “In New York City, they use the same tactics to cover up underperformance. It’s understandable if you want to dodge accountability, but it’s indefensible if what you want to do is educate kids.”

The report affirms Bradford’s assessment: “The School Quality Reports reveal grossly exaggerated pass rates on student coursework, giving parents a misleading picture of how their children are doing. Mayor de Blasio’s School Quality Reports would have you believe that roughly 85 percent of students in failing elementary and middle schools pass their coursework even though they are failing state exams. That 85 percent of students in schools with a 90+ percent failure rate on the New York State ELA exams manage to pass their ELA coursework belies logic. Either these schools are giving students below grade level work or they are accepting work product that does not meet grade level standards.”

‘Can’t Trust’ Student Grades

In a StudentsFirstNY press release, parents expressed their frustration with the grade inflation.

“My son recently got a 94 percent on his 10th grade science quiz, which I later learned was testing him on 5th-grade-level material,” said Automotive High School parent Evelyn Rodriguez. “The school is trying to fool us into thinking everything’s fine, but I want my son held to the standards that are going to prepare him for life.”

“My son is in the second grade at [Public School] 305 in Bedford-Stuyvesant, and he’s getting good grades in school,” said Nakeia Porter. “There’s a big disconnect, and I can’t trust my son’s grades because I know only 3 percent of kids in the building are passing state tests. I would rather know from the school now that there’s a problem, rather than waiting for state tests to tell me if there’s a problem.”

“The de Blasio administration must think they can lull parents into complacency by having schools give kids good grades even though the students are underprepared,” said Tenicka Boyd, a public school parent and director of organizing for StudentsFirstNY. “Parents want an honest assessment of where their children are so they can take the necessary steps to help their child improve.”

Calling for Audit

StudentsFirstNY Executive Director Jenny Sedlis says until coursework grades are accurate, there is no way to fix struggling New York City schools.

“Mayor de Blasio says he will turn around struggling schools, but how can he get a true picture of what’s really happening when these schools are inflating students’ grades?” asked Sedlis. “The city needs to bring in an independent auditor to get to the bottom of this.”

Heather Kays (hkays@heartland.org) is a research fellow with The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
NCLB Replacement Bill Becomes Law

Continued from page 1

The Senate also passed in July its rewrite of NCLB, the Every Child Achieves Act (ECAA). After 66 amendments to the original proposal, that measure passed with strong bipartisan support.

For months after the July votes, SSA and ECAA sat idle while their proponents awaited the creation of the conference committee needed to reconcile the bills into a composite piece of legislation both houses might approve and send to Obama for signing.

NCLB was itself a rewrite and renaming of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), first signed in 1965 by President Lyndon Johnson and amended and reauthorized by every president since.

‘Huge Improvement’ Over Status Quo

Education policy experts at the Fordham Institute and American Enterprise Institute (AEI) generally characterized the NCLB rewrite as a “huge improvement over the status quo” of mandates and the Obama administration’s use of waivers, according to Frederick Hess, resident scholar and director of education policy studies at AEI.

Hess says the Obama administration’s use of Race to the Top and waivers created “mischief” within the states, and he believes the new measure will remove Washington, DC from a position of dictating or influencing state accountability, school performance, and educational standards.

“For sure, conservatives didn’t get everything they wanted, [but] this is what winning looks like,” agreed Michael Petrilli, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. “After seven years of lawless, Washington-knows-best-actions from the Obama administration, the new ESEA will return authority over education back to the states, where it belongs.”

Activists Continue Fight

Grassroots activists do not share their optimism. Through social media outlets and an October letter signed by more than 200 experts in 46 states, activists had requested that Congress stop the reauthorization process until after the 2016 election cycle. Federal expansion of early childhood programs and behavioral data collection are high on the list of activist complaints.

Dr. Karen Effrem, president of Education Liberty Watch and executive director of the Florida Stop Common Core Coalition, said, “As a mother and a pediatrician, I am especially concerned about the expansion of the federal role in early childhood education. The new program imposes national early childhood standards, creating a ‘Baby Common Core’ situation with even more controversial standards than in K–12 [education]. In addition, many studies show that there is no evidence of long-term benefit of these programs, while there is significant evidence of academic and emotional harm.”

George Clowes, Ph.D., a policy advisor to The Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News, says the time spent trying to pass a reauthorization bill would have been better spent educating parents about Title I, which provides financial assistance to school districts with high percentages of low-income families. “By educating parents about the idea of Title I portability, NCLB reauthorization deliberations would involve parents as well as education administrators,” Clowes said.

Glyn Wright, executive director of Eagle Forum, an organization highly critical of federal involvement in education, expressed worries about the transparency and speed of the congressional process.

“While the American people thought this would be a public debate, the final bill was put together behind closed doors by committee leaders and their staff. [...] It doesn’t look like any of the reforms pushed by the grassroots [organizations] survived the process.”

GlYn WRIGHT
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
EAGLE FORUM

What is Common Core?

Common Core State Standards are the federal government’s effort to nationalize the curriculum taught in every elementary and secondary school in the United States, even private schools.

Common Core should be stopped because it...

» hurts kids by imposing high-stakes tests at very young ages,
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» Go to www.heartland.org/common-core for links to background research, videos, podcasts, and much more.

Jenni White (jwplusdmw@gmail.com) is cofounder of Restore Oklahoma Public Education and a former public school science teacher.
By Travis Pillow
Lawyers defending the country’s largest private school choice program are targeting the claim Florida’s tax credit scholarships were designed to replace an unconstitutional voucher program.

The claim is at the center of a lawsuit filed in 2014 by the statewide teachers union and other groups that oppose school choice. They have repeatedly argued the tax credit program is a “successor” to the Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP), which the Florida Supreme Court struck down in 2006 because it created a “parallel” public education system, in violation of Article IX of the state constitution, which gives the state the exclusive power to “[o]perate, control and supervise all free public schools within the school district.”

In briefs filed in December with the First District Court of Appeals, defense lawyers argued the teachers union has its history wrong.

“When the Legislature enacted the Tax Credit Scholarship Program in early 2001, this Court had concluded that the circuit court erroneously struck down its program. However, in the cases that came after, the Supreme Court struck down its program in 2006 because it created a parallel system, in violation of Article IX of the state constitution, which gives the state the exclusive power to operate, control and supervise all free public schools within the school district.”

Parents Join the Legal Battle
Earlier in 2015, a Leon County circuit judge had dismissed the lawsuit filed by the teachers union. The court determined the plaintiffs did not have standing to bring the case because they could not show the tax credit scholarship program harms public schools.

In their appeal filed during the summer, the union’s lawyers argued the 59,000 students who used scholarships “resulted in hundreds of millions of dollars in reduced funding for the public schools.”

The lawyers defending the program on behalf of the parents of choice students note the state’s legislature raised state funding for public schools by more than $1 billion for the 2013–14 school year, the year in which the scholarships became available. The lawyers also say the scholarship program may have helped public schools’ bottom line.

Lawyers for the state argue the appellate court should dismiss the case because the funding for the program comes from private donations, which allow donors to receive tax credits, rather than from the state treasury. This means any supposed claim the program harms taxpayers or the public relies on “speculation” about what the Florida Legislature would do if the tax credits did not exist.

The parents and the state have asked the appellate court judges to hear oral arguments for the case.

Travis Pillow (tpillow@sufs.org) is editor of redefined. An earlier version of this article appeared in redefined. Reprinted with permission.
Common Core’s Damage Will Last for Years to Come

By Peter Wood

Common Core K–12 math and English standards are lingering, despite concerted efforts by concerned parents and taxpayers to remove them. It is like a house with an underwater mortgage: The United States has invested so much in Common Core that it can’t easily get out. The investments include very large amounts spent on textbooks, computers to support the Common Core tests, and teacher training. The investment also includes some hard-to-quantify things: the squandered opportunity, the huge expenditure of political capital, the disaffection of millions of parents, and the psychological harm to students who face spending many more years living out the classroom consequences of a discredited educational experiment.

Students face those extra years of miseducation simply because there is no easy exit from Common Core. The textbooks and computers have been purchased and the teachers have been trained. Even the states running for the exit door have a long wind-down ahead of them.

Undoing some forms of bad policy can take years. Build a road or a bridge in the wrong place and chances are it is a permanent mistake, but if the government builds the wrong curriculum, chances are it has robbed a generation.

Demoting Literature

Some of the specific harms are easy to see. The Common Core is making a mess of instruction in reading and writing. It demotes reading literature, with fewer and fewer literary works assigned as a student advances through the grades. This demotion comes about because Common Core treats reading primarily as a tool for retrieving information. Stories, novels, plays, and poetry are not meant primarily as ways of conveying data or of ‘arguing’ a position.

Fitting the literary round pegs into Common Core’s square holes stuunts students’ development in key areas. It gets in the way of learning to see things “as a whole,” learning to grasp context, and learning how to think by means of analogy.

Analogy—the ability to see resemblances, large and small, and to draw useful comparisons—is among the most fundamental powers of the human mind. Education used to aim at enhancing this basic mental power. Common Core fights it. Common Core emphasizes fragments, deliberately out-of-context excerpts, and explicit declaration at the expense of richer forms of reading.

Promises Broken

This thinning out of math instruction betrays two key promises made by the Common Core’s proponents: the standards would be “internationally benchmarked” and they would make students “college and career ready.” Common Core is internationally benchmarked only in the sense that, with the aid of binoculars, you can see the bench—on the back of a foreign truck—rapidly disappearing a few miles up the road. The “college ready” part turned out to mean—as one of Common Core’s architects eventually confessed—ready for community college. Students who have higher aspirations have to fend for themselves by seeking out tutors or extracurricular supplementary classes.

Prosperous families will find workarounds, but for everyone else, Common Core imposes a low ceiling on what their children will learn in school.

Cutting Parents Out

Math instruction goes astray in other ways as well. Common Core is already infamous with parents for imposing tediously complicated forms of computation on children in primary school. The computations “work” in the limited sense of providing right answers (most of the time), but they also drive a wedge between parent and child—deliberately, it seems—since very few parents can crack the code.
Poll: Education a High Voter Priority Neglected by Presidential Candidates

By Bruce Edward Walker

Recent polling conducted by Public Opinion Strategies indicates most registered voters in U.S. swing states think education should be a top priority for the next president.

Sixty-eight percent of voters surveyed reported education is a more important policy issue than immigration or health care, and only 36 percent said they have heard the current field of presidential candidates discuss education policy.

Communities in Schools, a national nonprofit organization dedicated to curtailing student dropouts, commissioned the poll, which surveyed 1,200 voters in Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, and Virginia between October 7 and November 2. The poll has a margin of error of ±2.8 percent.

“For sure, national security and the economy are at the top of the list for conservative voters to date, and the GOP presidential candidates and the media are responding to those concerns,” said Deneen Borelli, chief political correspondent for the Conservative Review website. “As the field whittles down, education will become an important issue to distinguish the candidates, especially as it relates to Common Core.”

‘A State and Local Issue’

Improving K–12 education ranks fourth on the list of voter concerns, according to the poll. The top three priorities are improving the economy and creating jobs (90 percent); reducing the national debt (76 percent); and holding down national spending (75 percent). Other issues most voters identified as important include reforming Social Security and Medicare (67 percent); fixing immigration and border security (66 percent); fixing the Affordable Care Act (64 percent); improving higher education (61 percent); and cutting federal taxes (56 percent).

Dave Trabert, president of the Kansas Policy Institute, says there may be a good reason voters aren’t hearing presidential candidates discuss education policy. He says Republican contenders for the office may not be discussing the issue because education is an issue for state and local governments, not the national government.

“Education shouldn’t be an issue for candidates for national office,” Trabert said. “Considering the dismal performances of students educated under such federal programs as Common Core and No Child Left Behind, the last thing we need is another top-down, national education initiative.”

William Mattox, director of the Center for Educational Options at the James Madison Institute, says some presidential candidates have highlighted education policy.

“Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush has pointed to his remarkable success in pioneering school choice programs as evidence that ‘Jeb can fix it,’” said Mattox. “And prior to his departure from the race, Gov. Bobby Jindal sought to build GOP grassroots support by citing his impressive record promoting school choice and course access in Louisiana.

Still, given the understandable wariness that most Republican primary voters have about the federal government’s role in education, it’s not altogether surprising that other issues have had greater salience in the 2016 GOP presidential nominee race up to now.

“Personally, I’d welcome a little more attention to presidential candidates’ views on education policy,” Mattox said. “With a recent Friedman Foundation poll showing that Hispanic voters care more about expanding educational options than they do about immigration, it’d be nice to see more presidential candidates using their bully pulpit to promote school choice.”

Strong Support for ESAs, Vouchers

Kyle Olson, president of the Education Action Institute, says the federal government’s role in education should be minimal. Olson notes a poll conducted in summer 2015 by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice concluded education is the second issue of importance listed by school parents surveyed. Olson says the number one issue is improving the economy and jobs.

“Less than half of the Friedman survey respondents replied they thought K–12 education in the United States was on the right track,” Olson said. “Only 39 percent said they’re optimistic about how our nation educates its children.

“Among Republicans, 68 percent said they’re unhappy with our country’s public education; 67 percent favored education savings accounts; and 63 percent indicated they strongly support vouchers,” said Olson.

Bruce Edward Walker (walker.editorial@gmail.com) is a policy analyst for The Heartland Institute.

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freedom, disinterested scholarship, and excellence in research and citizens with a commitment to academic freedom, disinterested scholarship, and excellence in American higher education.

Peter Wood (pwood@nas.org) is president of the National Association of Scholars, a network of scholars and citizens with a commitment to academic freedom, disinterested scholarship, and excellence in American higher education.
The percentage of students passing the New York State Regents algebra test fell from 72 percent in 2014 to 63 percent in 2015, even after the New York Education Department (NYED) used a process called “equating” in hopes of ensuring a similar pass rate.

After the first Common Core State Standards exams given to New York 3rd through 8th graders in 2013 resulted in plummeting scores for both English and math, NYED changed the test to make it easier for students to pass in 2014. In addition, the department manipulated the scores on the 2014 Regents exam given to 9th through 12th graders so the same percentage would pass the test as before, ostensibly because of its nature as a high-stakes test for seniors, who must pass six Regent exams to graduate.

Supporters of Common Core have continually characterized their standards as more rigorous than previously developed state standards. Proponents claimed the math standards would be more rigorous, as they were unlike earlier math standards, relying heavily on mathematical thought processes instead of memorization and traditional calculation procedures. Common Core proponents also said they expected test scores to drop as a result of the higher standards—a claim contradicted by the fact states can and do alter pass rates, often referred to as cut scores. In addition, the supposedly new mathematical processes were actually recycled from decades prior.

In an early 2013 Engage New York video, then-New York State Education Commissioner John King argued, “Lower proficiency scores … [do] not mean that schools are doing worse or that students have learned less, but it tells us where we are against the bar of college and career readiness.”

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Now, with fewer students passing tests manipulated to increase the percentage who pass, the New York Regents have established a committee to determine whether the bar for passing has been set too high.

New York State has the highest number of testing opt-outs in the nation, a result of parents’ protests against the state’s use of Common Core and what parents perceive to be a climate of over-testing and continual manipulation of test scores and achievement standards. “Yes, they told us the first year the scores wouldn’t be good, but they keep telling us every year the test scores will be better and they’re not. Each year [NYED] keeps changing the benchmarks to make Common Core look good, but they can’t. It’s impossible.”


By Tom Gantert

The head of the State of New York’s school system has taken action under a new state law allowing her to impose a superintendent’s proposed revisions to a collective bargaining contract, despite objections from the teachers union on the other side of the table.

State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia handed down the ruling on November 9. The changes apply to five schools identified as the worst-performing schools in Buffalo. The Buffalo City School District has 57 schools.

Buffalo City School District Superintendent Kriner Cash asked Elia to intervene after negotiations stalled with the Buffalo Teachers Federation union.

New Law Empowers Administrators

The New York State Assembly passed a new law in April 2015 pertaining to school receivership. The state’s Board of Regents approved new regulations in June to implement the provisions of the law.

The law allows the state to change the collective bargaining agreement in five areas: length of the school day, length of the school year, professional development for teachers and administrators, class size and changes to programs, and assignments and teaching conditions.

According to officials representing New York State, Cash wanted to increase the length of the school year and school day at five of the city’s schools labeled “Persistently Struggling.” That designation applies to schools that have been on the state’s accountability watch list for several consecutive years.

The law calls for an increase in compensation for school employees when the length of the school day or school year is extended.

“Students at these Persistently Struggling schools need help right now,” Elia said in a press release. “The receivership law gives the superintendent enhanced authority in order to maintain local control while facilitating rapid improvement in student outcomes.”

MARYELLEN ELIA, STATE EDUCATION COMMISSIONER, NEW YORK STATE

A ‘Dire and Drastic Situation’

Charles Sahm, director of education policy at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research in New York City, says the poor performance of the schools that went into receivership requires drastic action.

“[Elia] is recognizing these kids are in a pretty dire and drastic situation,” Sahm said. “The state constitution guarantees a sound basic education. When you have almost no students in the schools scoring proficient on state exams, you can make a case they are being denied those guaranteed rights. … Obviously, something has to be done with these schools. If the teachers union is not going to allow any meaningful intervention, there is a way to go around these unions.”

The new law provides the way to do so, Sahm says.

Cynthia Estlund, a professor of law at the New York University School of Law, said she did a quick review of the commissioner’s ruling and it appears to be legal under state law.

“There is no great novelty in the idea of a ‘receivership’ in which normal governance procedures are suspended,” Estlund said.

Tom Gantert (gantert@mackinac.org) is senior capitol correspondent for Michigan Capitol Confidential, a daily news site of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.
Mich. Think Tank Launches ‘Choosing Charters’ Website

By Bruce Edward Walker

The Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a free-market think tank headquartered in Midland, Michigan, launched a new website in November promoting charter schools in the state.

ChoosingCharters.com features facts, statistics, and video interviews challenging popular misconceptions about charter schools.

Michigan currently enrolls an estimated 150,000 students in charter schools, many from lower-income families in urban areas such as Detroit, Flint, and Grand Rapids. The website reports 70 percent of Michigan charter school students come from low-income families, compared to 44 percent of those attending traditional public schools.

“Despite the best evidence showing charter schools are helping students achieve more, charter schools have come under attack recently as some politicians and their supporters have declared them a failed waste of money,” said Michael Van Beek, the Mackinac Center’s director of research. “But these critics don’t typically ask parents what they think of these schools they've chosen for their children, and our new website is an attempt to give those parents a voice so that their educational options are not swept out from under them.”

Gary G. Naeyaert, executive director of the Great Lakes Education Project, a bipartisan school choice advocacy group, lauded the Mackinac Center effort.

“The Mackinac Center site is needed to increase awareness of educational options in Michigan,” Naeyaert said.

‘Tremendous Educational Gains’

Citing findings from Stanford University’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes, Naeyaert says charter schools in urban areas are making tremendous reading, mathematics, and graduation gains compared to traditional public schools.

Although charter schools are relatively new in New Orleans, for example, they achieve a graduation rate 20 percentage points higher than traditional public schools, according to the report. The same study reports mathematics scores for charter school students are 42 percent higher than for students in traditional public schools, and charter students performed 35 percent higher on reading examinations.

Michigan charter schools currently educate 53 percent of all students in Detroit, giving it the second-highest percentage of charter-school-educated students in the nation, behind New Orleans, Naeyaert says. He says Flint is third in the nation, with 47 percent of students attending charter schools.

Despite these numbers, charter schools barely register on many parents’ radar, if at all, Naeyaert says.

“Charter schools in Michigan began only 20 years ago,” Naeyaert said. “But there’s a vast majority of parents who don’t understand there exist educational alternatives for their children beyond the traditional public school monopoly.”

Bruce Edward Walker (walker. editorial@gmail.com) is a policy analyst for The Heartland Institute.

Amicus Brief Filed to Overturn Blaine Amendments, Opens Door for Greater Choice

By Heather Kays

Four education groups have filed an amicus brief in the hopes of convincing the U.S. Supreme Court to consider a Colorado voucher case that would require examining the scope of the state’s Blaine amendment.

In 2011, Douglas County, Colorado implemented a pilot voucher program. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) alleged the program violated the state’s constitution, and the Colorado Supreme Court agreed in June 2015, eliminating the program.

The Goldwater Institute, Foundation for Excellence in Education, Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options (HCREO), and American Federation for Children filed a brief with the U.S. Supreme Court supporting the Colorado law in December. If the groups succeed, the Supreme Court could overturn Blaine amendments across the nation, opening up the possibility of additional school choice programs for millions of children.

Blaine amendments are state constitutional provisions that prevent the use of public money for a religious purpose. Opponents of school choice often challenge choice programs by claiming taxpayer money could potentially go to a religious school.

‘Motivated by Anti-Catholic Bigotry’

Goldwater Institute Vice President for Litigation Clint Bolick says Blaine amendments are rooted in religious prejudice.

“Blaine amendments are the biggest legal obstacle in the states to school vouchers,” said Bolick. “This lawsuit could strike down Blaine amendments because they were motivated by anti-Catholic bigotry and discriminate against religious families and schools.”

“If Douglas County prevails, not only will it save their voucher program, but it could open the door to school vouchers in other states where Blaine amendments present obstacles,” Bolick said.

Fighting for School Choice

Julio Fuentes, president and CEO of HCREO, says school choice is the key to correcting broken traditional public school systems.

“From Hispanic CREO’s point of view, obviously supporting any fight against school choice programs, we’re all over it,” said Fuentes. “The more opportunity we give our children and families for quality education, the better. What the current public school system is dishing out isn’t good enough. Any additional educational opportunities are a good thing.”

“The dropout rate speaks for itself,” said Fuentes. “All families would benefit from school choice programs we see in other parts of the country.”

Bolick says overturning Blaine amendments would expand educational opportunities for students all around the nation.

“At least three dozen states have Blaine amendments, so the effect of the ruling could be seismic,” said Bolick. “That is what we argued to [the Court] in an effort to convince it to grant review in the case.”

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

Smarick said. “For those programs to like vouchers, tax credits, and ESAs,” number of private school choice programs, because there are a growing num-
ber of great private school seats. “Social capital” that could take years for a new school to replicate, the study
notes. Smarick said, “For those programs to succeed, they need excellent school providers to participate.”

Strengthening Catholic Schools

Even though 21 percent of the nation’s Catholic schools closed between 2005 and 2015, there is a compelling case “for the strength of Catholic schools serving low-income populations,” the study suggests. The need appears to be greatest in low-income areas, the exact place where many parochial schools struggle to sustain themselves.

“We were intrigued to find that PSMOs seem to fall into two broad categories,” said Smarick. “Some are organizing existing schools [often urban Catholic schools] into new networks as a means of helping them with enrollment, finances, and school performance. Other PSMOs are starting new schools, typically in states with choice programs.”

The independent PSMOs could “expand the options available to low-income families in urban areas,” the study states.

PSMOs could bring a diversity of charter, district, and private schools to many cities whose education sector is currently unable to meet parents’ demands for choice schools. Private schools have the capacity to give religious instruction for children whose parents prefer that option. In addition, maintaining private schools could be more cost-effective than creating new charter schools, and these existing schools have formed connections and “social capital” that could take years for a new school to replicate, the study notes.

Choice schools vary in character. They can be new startups or re-openings, or they could be part of an existing school. Similarly, PSMOs can have various degrees of academic or operational centralization, reflecting the flexibility and variety of the management organizations.

The majority of new-school PSMOs require consistent, reliable funding, and they tend to start in states where public programs provide such funding via vouchers or tax credit scholarships.

Starting Point for More Research

The study encourages additional research on the possibility of PSMOs operating outside of urban areas, the advantages of independence from the public sector in schools’ management, and the relationships between parishes or church organizations and their allied schools.

“If PSMOs turn out to be as successful as CMOs,” they will be a valuable contribution to K–12 education,” said Smarick. “We’re convinced that observers should keep an eye on PSMOs as they develop and that policymakers, philanthropists, and other stakeholders should seriously consider supporting them.”

Amanda Tindall (atindall@hillsdale.edu) writes from Hillsdale, Michigan.

PSMOs Can Increase Availability of Diverse, High-Quality Schools

By Amanda Tindall

A study by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, titled “Private School Pioneers: Studying the Emerging Field of Private School Management Organizations,” examined private school management organizations (PSMOs) and found they can bring additional high-quality, diverse choice schools into existence.

The study defines a PSMO as “an independent entity ... neither a governmental agency nor embedded within a church hierarchy,” which “operates or helps operate” three or more private schools.

The concept of a network of private schools builds on the highly effective charter school model. “CMOs have created many of the charter sector’s highest-performing high-poverty schools over the last decade. So, there’s reason to hope that new PSMOs could play an important role in growing the supply of great private school seats.”

“Quietly, part of the private school community has embraced the school-network approach pioneered by successful charter management organizations, or CMOs,” said Andy Smarick, partner at Bellwether Education Partners and one of the authors of the study. “CMOs have created many of the charter sector’s highest-performing high-poverty schools over the last decade. So, there’s reason to hope that new PSMOs could play an important role in growing the supply of great private school seats.”

“This is important not just because kids, especially low-income kids, need access to successful schools, but also because there are a growing number of private school choice programs, like vouchers, tax credits, and ESAs,” Smarick said. “For those programs to succeed, they need excellent school providers to participate.”

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Amanda Tindall (atindall@hillsdale.edu) writes from Hillsdale, Michigan.

By Bruce Edward Walker

School choice proponents say they have reservations about recently elected Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards (D).

Edwards, a former state representative, defeated Republican U.S. Sen. David Vitter for the governor’s seat in what was widely described as a surprising 56–44 percent upset.

Jeanne Allen, founder and president emeritus of the Center for Education Reform, says the election of Edwards will dampen Louisiana’s charter school movement.

“All signs point to this governor lacking a strong forward compass for school choice,” Allen said. “While the teachers union has less impact than it once did, John Bel Edwards was heavily backed by the unions. That’s problematic because while the rank-and-file teachers in the largest cities such as [New Orleans] are employed by charters, their leaders focus on reducing their ability to open and grow in the Bayou.

“Also of great concern is the governor’s veiled attempt to do the same,” said Allen. “In his first address since winning the election, he’s already said that he wants more ‘accountability’ for charter schools, which really translates into more regulations that burden charter schools and limit the innovation and autonomy that have allowed them to become successful.”

Governor Criticized Voucher Program

“[Bel Edwards] has also recommended scaling back the state’s voucher program, which is critical to many children’s success in school and life and which is already burdened by regulations that limit private school participation, stifling the high demand for more schools,” said Allen.

“The key to solving our nation’s educational crisis is electing governors who understand they have the power to change a system, and a key part of that equation is choice,” said Allen. “Nothing about this elected governor indicates that he’s willing to do what it takes [to] accelerate the pace of meaningful reform in Louisiana.”

Kevin Kane, president of the New Orleans-based free-market think tank the Pelican Institute, agrees Edwards will reduce school choice options.

“John Bel Edwards was the favored candidate of the teachers unions, and that does not bode well for advancing school choice in Louisiana,” Kane said.

“It’s worth noting that political will exists from the legislative and business communities to protect the state’s voucher program and other school choice programs from being rolled back,” Kane said.

Bruce Edward Walker (walker.editorial@gmail.com) is a policy analyst for The Heartland Institute.

W. Va. Education Chief Announces Common Core Repeal

By Bruce Edward Walker

The West Virginia state superintendent of schools announced on November 13 his plan to repeal Common Core K–12 math and English standards and replace them with College and Career Ready (CCR) standards developed specifically for the state.

West Virginia teachers and higher education professionals wrote the CCR standards collaboratively. Parents and public officials were also part of the process. A 30-day public comment period for the revised K–12 standards opened prior to the West Virginia Board of Education’s vote in December on whether to repeal Common Core and replace it with CCR standards.

“I am proud of the work that has occurred throughout the last several months, because this effort was generated from the bottom up, with input from our educators and community members,” state Superintendent Michael Martirano told School Reform News. “These proposed new standards increase the level of rigor for our students while also removing complexity for teachers. Ultimately, we are focused on outlining a set of standards that ensure our students are equipped with the skills needed for college, careers, and the twenty-first century world of work.”

‘Unique to West Virginia’

According to West Virginia Board of Education President Mike Green, officials considered more than 250,000 comments made by participants in public forums held throughout the state while drafting the proposed replacement standards.

“I believe this process was transparent, and I am proud of the work that has been done to develop a set of revised standards that are unique to West Virginia and developed with the input of our state residents and education experts,” Green said.

“The proposed standards allow more flexibility for teachers,” said Kim Randolph, director of communications for the West Virginia Education Association. “Eighty percent of our previous state standards were reflected in the Common Core standards, but we’re very happy with the proposed new standards.”

‘Strive for Excellence’

On November 9, the Thomas More Law Center filed a lawsuit against West Virginia Gov. Earl Tomblin (D) and other state officials to stop implementation of Common Core. The lawsuit claims the state’s membership in the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) is unconstitutional because SBAC was never approved by Congress. The lawsuit also argues membership in SBAC requires the West Virginia standards to align with Common Core.

“It’s unclear whether the lawsuit will proceed if CCR standards replace Common Core. "My reading of the current education climate is that there isn’t much to distinguish Common Core from the new standards," said Jim Shaffer, president of the Public Policy Foundation of West Virginia. “At first blush, it seems they only polished the apple a little differently.”

Despite his initial skepticism, Shaffer says his main concern is to have education standards developed by West Virginia stakeholders rather than what he identifies as the “least-common denominator” and “cookie cutter” approach offered by Common Core.

“We should strive for excellence when it comes to educating our children,” Shaffer said.

Bruce Edward Walker (walker.editorial@gmail.com) is a policy analyst for The Heartland Institute.
New Harvard Teacher Education Program Emphasizes Content, Practical Experience

By Ashley Bateman

A new program at Harvard University, based in the university’s School of Education, is being characterized by its creators as establishing a practical, effective, and nationally replicable teacher preparation model that emphasizes content and gaining practical experience, instead of utilizing more-theoretical classes about the history and philosophy of education.

“Teaching schools have fallen short of what high-needs urban schools require,” said Stephen Mahoney, a professor in the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Private donors contributed $18 million to support a fellowship spearheaded by Harvard Graduate School of Education Dean James E. Ryan. A fellowship that will launch on January 26 will place 24 or more seniors in a spring semester foundations course. One week after the fellows graduate, they will begin a summer immersion program through the education school, which will run from June 1 through mid-August.

“The logic is that we are pulling into teaching Harvard students who have been primarily excited by the content of their discipline while they are undergraduates,” Mahoney said. “We don’t want to burn up course time with education classes. … It’s more that we need to have really smart, structured, reflective experiences with teaching and learning, not as much history and philosophy of education.”

Less History and Philosophy of Education

The Harvard education program rejects the traditional teacher preparation model, which sets would-be teachers on an education track in the second or third year of college.

“Over the last few years there has been a lot of attention on the idea of teacher effectiveness and how we make sure teachers in our classrooms are effective,” said Sandi Jacobs, vice president of the National Council for Teacher Quality. “There’s a lot of evidence, mostly from teachers themselves, that a lot of the [current] training doesn’t really prepare people to be ready. … We force our new teachers to sink or swim.”

High Expectations

Expectations for those who participate in the program are high. Fellows are asked to commit five to seven years of teaching at placement schools.

Mahoney hopes for 90 percent of students in the program to pass, with the program expanding to 70 or 75 students in the next three or four years.

“These kinds of programs are really important in what we can learn from them, but whether this is a large-scale solution remains to be seen,” Jacobs said.

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.
Michigan Gov. Proposes Bailout of Struggling Detroit Public Schools

By Tom Gantert

Two years after the City of Detroit went through a highly publicized bankruptcy, Michigan’s governor is proposing a $715 million bailout of the troubled Detroit Public Schools (DPS).

Gov. Rick Snyder’s (R) plan would have Michigan taxpayers pay $515 million to erase the district’s short-term debt and use $200 million to create a new school district for the city. The plan would require approval by the state legislature. No lawmaker had submitted a bill as of early December 2015.

Gary Naeyaert, executive director of the Great Lakes Education Project, a group working for education reform in Michigan, opposes a bailout of DPS. He says it would rescue those who created the bad budgets.

“It’s throwing good money after bad to even consider taking $715 million that should be used to educate children all over the state and use it to pay off old debt from the state’s worst-performing district. It’s simple. We should stick a fork in DPS, because they’re done.”

John Rakolta, a Michigan businessman, is co-chair of a coalition that is proposing its own bailout of DPS. The Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schools/child plan would require the state to absorb the district of $153 million per year in debt and pension payments through legislation yet to be filed. Rakolta says DPS’s debt increases by $1 million every school day. Snyder’s plan would also require legislative action.

If DPS declares bankruptcy, Michigan taxpayers could be on the hook for an estimated $3.4 billion of the school district’s liabilities. According to the Michigan Treasury Department, if Detroit Public Schools files for bankruptcy, the state would be directly responsible for $1.3 billion in pension liability and another $196 million in loans backed by the state. A bankruptcy ruling could leave the state responsible for another $1.5 billion in long-term qualified bonds.

DPS officials have been overspending on daily operating expenses since 2007–08, according to the Michigan Department of Education. The district’s annual deficit for its general fund budget was at $238.2 million as of September 2015.

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

AltSchool Private School Network Expanding to Chicago in 2017

By Tom Gantert

A network of small private schools called AltSchool, founded by a former Google executive, is expanding to Chicago in fall 2017.

Illinois would become the third state with an AltSchool.

The schools were founded by Max Ventilla, a former Google executive who now is CEO of AltSchool. Investors in AltSchool reportedly include Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, who has reportedly contributed $100 million. AltSchool currently has campuses in California cities San Francisco and Palo Alto and in New York City.

A “micro-school” philosophy keeps schools to about 80 to 150 students, which AltSchool says allows for a more flexible and personalized educational experience than a traditional school environment.

Charles Sahm, director of education policy at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, says the idea of smaller schools is nothing new in his state.

Sahm says New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg closed more than 150 schools and opened more than 650 new, smaller schools in their place during his tenure from 2002–13, and the high school graduation rates in New York City rose over the same period. The class of 2002 had a graduation rate of 50.8 percent, whereas the class of 2013 had a graduation rate of 71.4 percent, according to the New York City Department of Education.

Sahm says the idea of start-up private schools such as AltSchool is fine for those who can afford the tuition. AltSchool’s tuition ranges from $2,625 to $3,150 per month, with a 10-month minimum.

AltSchool has four schools in San Francisco, one in Palo Alto, and one in Brooklyn. The organization plans to open three more schools in San Francisco and one more in New York in fall 2016.

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