Texas Legislature to Vote on Parent Trigger Update

By Ashley Bateman

The Texas House will vote on a bill to simplify the state’s Parent Trigger law and let parents petition earlier to take control of a school’s future.

Sponsored by state Sen. Larry Taylor (R-Friendswood), Senate Bill 1263 passed the House, then the Senate Education Committee unanimously March 28. It is likely to have a favorable reception in the Senate, said James Golsan, education policy analyst for the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

“Texas is always extremely cautious about any education reform,” Golsan said. “So we basically added a law to the books, got our foot in the door, but it’s not really a law that anyone would have much incentive to use.”

That powerlessness frustrates grassroots leader Rev. Kyev Tatum, who hails from Dallas-Fort Worth.

“All the parents that I work with across the state just want help, and they want freedom,” he said. “They have no kind of relief or appeal process and have no leverage within the system.”

“[Five years] is too long for parents, and more importantly students, to put up with a failing school before they may demand action.”

LARRY TAYLOR, STATE SENATOR FRIENDSWOOD, TEXAS

Indiana Expands Voucher Program

By Rachel Sheffield

In May, Gov. Mike Pence (R) signed a measure expanding the Indiana voucher program to children zoned into failing public schools and special-needs students, regardless of family income.

Before the expansion, Indiana’s voucher program provided private school scholarships only to families meeting certain income requirements.

State Sen. Carlin Yoder (R-Middlebury), who sponsored the proposal, says under the new policy, siblings of current scholarship students would be automatically eligible.

INDIANA, p. 2

Mike Pence
Governor - Indiana
Indiana Expands Its Statewide Voucher Program

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“This bill would not require siblings of current Choice Scholarship participants to attend a public school for one year to be eligible for the scholarship program,” Yoder noted. “This step is important because it can often be difficult for parents to have children in two different school systems, with two different schedules. For me, this bill is about keeping families together and allowing them the opportunity to choose the school that best fits their needs.”

Indiana first approved statewide vouchers in 2011, with gradually increasing caps on participation that end this fall. Two-thirds of the state’s students will soon be eligible for the program. In 2012–13, more than 9,000 Indiana students are receiving vouchers and nearly 300 schools are participating.

Meeting Individual Needs

Single mom Ronna Papesh says a voucher has made it possible for her daughter to attend a school that meets her needs.

Papesh’s daughter was diagnosed with dyslexia in first grade. “Any time there was any writing involved,” she recalled, “[my daughter] would start misbehaving. She never did before, and that clued me in that there was something that wasn’t working for her there.”

For second grade, Papesh transferred her daughter to a private school, paying the tuition out-of-pocket, “along with my state taxes and everything else, and it just got to be too much to continue. I was just so thankful for the voucher system so that she could return to [the private] school. She is thriving there.”

Papesh says the school choice program “empowers families” by allowing them to “find a solution and a way for their child to get an effective education.” She believes the voucher system is most valuable for children like her daughter, with special needs.

“The public school system may not be meeting [every child’s] needs,” she said. “We must acknowledge that what is effective for some may not be effective for all.”

For children like Papesh’s, Indiana’s voucher program has been “very successful,” and expanding it “will only make the nation’s leading student voucher program better,” said state Rep. Todd Huston (R-Fishers).

House Bill 1003 also would attach special-education funds to the student’s voucher if the child has been designated special-needs. That could increase the voucher by up to $8,350 for students with severe disabilities.

“I feel passionately that education is for everyone, but it’s no good if it’s not going to be effective for the individual,” Papesh said. “I challenge the legislators and educators to continue finding ways to match each student with an effective educational methodology.”

Rachel Sheffield (rachel.sheffield@heritage.org) is an education research assistant at The Heritage Foundation.

“For me, this bill is about keeping families together and allowing them the opportunity to choose the school that best fits their needs.”

CARLIN YODER, STATE SENATOR MIDDLEBURY, INDIANA
Texas Legislature to Vote on Parent Trigger Update

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Texas’s current Parent Trigger law allows the state to reorganize a public school or convert it to a charter if it’s rated “academically unacceptable” for three consecutive years. If the school’s rating does not improve within two years after state intervention, parents can petition to close the school or convert it to a charter school.

“This is too long for parents, and more importantly students, to put up with a failing school before they may demand action,” Taylor said.

After the initial law passed, the Texas Parents Union worked with California’s Parent Revolution, a community organizing group that supports the Parent Trigger, to pattern a bill more closely on California’s 2011 Parent Trigger, including an expedited timeline and short list of action options once parents petitioned.

SB 1263 would give parents the right to petition to close or convert a school after it has been rated “academically unacceptable” for two years.

The Testing Distraction

At the forefront of Texas’s legislative session is the state’s ongoing standards and testing battle, putting school choice in the back seat, potentially to the benefit of Parent Trigger supporters, Golsan said.

“Relative to standards fighting, school choice has been far less polarizing,” Golsan said. “The testing [uproar] really bogged down everything else.”

The Texas House recently passed a bill to reduce state testing requirements from 15 tests to five for students to graduate high school. School ratings, heavily dependent on test scores, are key to parents’ ability to use a Parent Trigger. Changes to the current rating system will shift how and when Texas parents can use the Parent Trigger.

Promoting the Parent Trigger and reducing standardized testing are somewhat in conflict, said Matt Prewett, founder of the Texas Parents Union, a grassroots parent group.

“The Parent Trigger would only mean something if that school was really failing, but the problem is, every high-poverty Texas school was being rated as failing due to standardized testing,” Prewett said.

Three Years to Wait

Although Texas is often represented as “a strong Republican state with strong values that creates this enterprise,” Tatum said, its education system does not live up to that ideal.

“Right now, the public schools are the only game in town, and the charter schools have the same burdens as public schools,” Tatum said. “The public school system has the upper hand when you’re dealing with politics, because they have an enormous amount of cash flow [for] lobbying. This has to be about the fundamental [goal], giving every child access to a quality education.”

Under SB 1263, school boards would maintain their ability to submit a competing plan for reform to the commissioner of education, who would decide whether to implement theirs or the parents’ plan, Taylor said.

“No parent has three years to wait,” Tatum said. “Three years is the difference between life and death in a kid’s education process and their spirit.”

‘Move Out of the Way’

“The state should treat K-12 kids the same way it treats college kids,” Tatum said. “They provide the funds based on need. They let the kids and the parents choose which school they go to. The government has to provide the resources and move out of the way.”

It may be difficult for charter management organizations to monitor Parent Trigger schools because of their obligations elsewhere and low state charter school funding, Prewett said.

“Rather than look at failing schools, I’d like to look at failing situations,” he said. “If we want to prioritize failing schools, if we say that high-poverty or failing schools, if those are schools we want to prioritize for parents to have other options, we could provide parents with more money.”

Likelihood of Passage

The infighting over testing, and the Senate Education Committee’s backing of the bill, give it momentum this session, Golsan said.

“Our House [of Representatives] can be an entirely different story,” Golsan said. “It would be hard to tell at this point how they will take it. They are much more favorable toward public school choice than private school choice, so on that front I’d be more optimistic.”

Taylor said he has received positive responses to the bill from colleagues on both sides of the aisle.

“Since we already have a Parent Trigger provision in statute and our bill is a simple change to that, I feel that we will have wide acceptance,” Taylor said.

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
Lots of people talk about school reform, but how much change actually occurs?

Here’s an idea that has promise: the Parent Trigger. If a majority of parents and guardians of children at a particular school sign a petition demanding reform, then the school district must do as the parents ask.

This Policy Brief looks at the Parent Trigger laws already in place and how they have worked in practice, and it offers suggestions to parents and elected officials for crafting their own legislation.

The Parent Trigger: Justification and Design Guidelines
By Joseph L. Bast and Joy Pullmann
October 2012, 49pp., $7.95
free download at www.heartland.org
For more information about the Parent Trigger, visit theparenttrigger.com
Texas Considers 5 School Choice Bills

By Mary Petrides Tillotson

On April 9, Texas senators heard Senate Bill 1575, one of five school choice bills before state lawmakers this spring.

Under the bill, sponsored by state Sen. Donna Campbell (R-New Braunfels) and cosponsored by state Sen. Ken Paxton (R-McKinney), the state would reimburse parents for private school tuition. Other Texas bills would let businesses write off donations to a nonprofit organization that grants K-12 scholarships.

Taxpayer Savings Grants

SB 1575 would authorize taxpayer savings grants, which reimburse parents who transfer their children to private schools with up to 60 percent of the state’s average per-pupil expenditure, roughly $5,100. The state would save the other 40 percent, roughly $3,400 per pupil.

State Rep. Scott Turner (R-Frisco) is sponsoring the bill’s House companion, HB 3497.

“Taxpayer Savings Grants give parents the opportunity to select the best school for their child while saving the state billions of dollars that can be reinvested in public schools or other priorities,” Campbell said in an email.

Tax Credits

Three bills—SB 23, SB 1015, and HB 3245—propose education tax credits. Businesses would receive credits for donating to nonprofit organizations that award scholarships to students who want to attend private schools.

“The money is then not really flowing through the state. It ends up going to kids directly,” said Paxton, who is sponsoring SB 1015 and cosponsoring SB 23. “It ends up being totally about where the kids want to go. The state isn’t directing the dollars. It seems like a cleaner, easier approach, and to me, it’s an easier sell.”

SB 23 would require scholarship organizations to give first priority to students already receiving scholarships and their siblings, and second priority to students attending low-performing schools. The scholarships may not exceed 80 percent of the state’s average per-pupil spending, or $6,800.

Paxton said the two Senate bills are “pretty much the same thing,” so SB 1015 would probably not go to a vote since SB 23 is sponsored by state Sen. Dan Patrick (R-Houston), the education committee chair.

Patrick did not return calls for comment.

The House tax-credit bill, sponsored by state Rep. Bill Callegari (R-Katy), would permit donations to fund scholarships worth up to 60 percent of the average public school per-pupil cost.

“It doesn’t detract from the property taxes of the school district, and I think that’s very important,” Callegari said. “For the most part, I do support public schools here, just because the education lobby is very powerful,” said Allan Parker, president of the Justice Foundation and coordinator of the Texas Savings Grant Coalition, “but there were over a million voters in Texas who voted for school choice in the Republican primary. … That’s giving a good push for school choice.”

The Right Time

School choice traditionally has been a tough sell in Texas, said James Gol-san, an education policy analyst for the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

“Texas has always been, by nature, conservative with a small ‘c.’ Anything that’s pretty aggressive reform, like school choice, is difficult to get moving, because we’re hesitant about radical change,” he said.

Texas allows 215 charter operators to run schools in the state. In 2011, 56,000 students sat on a charter school waiting list. By 2013, that number increased to 100,000, he said.

But the Texas legislature is changing, Paxton said. Since he joined the Senate in 2003, he’s seen a shift toward more choice-friendly legislature, especially in the Senate and its education committee.

“Both [bills] are uphill battles at this point, because the education lobby is very powerful,” said Allan Parker, president of the Justice Foundation and coordinator of the Texas Savings Grant Coalition, “but there were over a million voters in Texas who voted for school choice in the Republican primary. … That’s giving a good push for school choice.”

‘Every Kid Is Different’

School choice helps ensure good schools because of a “bottom-up accountability driven by parents who can vote with their feet,” Golsan said.

“While we’ve got a lot of excellent public schools here, just because the school is physically close to the kid doesn’t mean the school will be best suited for the child,” he said. “Choice will level the playing field and give each student a shot at the best quality education they can get.”

School choice isn’t just about low-performing schools, Paxton said, because all students have different needs.

“For kids that want to do something different and for parents who want to do something different than what they’re at now, I’d like the opportunity to move their children to whatever’s best for them,” he said. “Every kid is different. Every situation is different. The dollars ought to flow with the parent and the kid, and not just the city they live in.”

‘A Life or Death Issue’

The added competition would encourage educators to improve schools, he said.

“Kids and parents should have choices, and these bills provide [that]. Competition … works in the private sector, and it works in education,” he said.

Improving education is “a life or death issue for many, many children,” Parker said.

“It’s not just a good idea. Children’s souls and lives are literally being lost in the quagmire of public education,” he said. “The only way to get any real change is by eliminating the barriers to entry and allowing new good schools to be created.”

Mary Petrides Tillotson (maryc.tillotson@gmail.com), a former Michigan reporter, now writes from Front Royal, Virginia.
By Ashley Bateman

State Senate Republicans blocked a bill to repeal New Hampshire’s new tax-credit scholarship law, but pending court cases and repeal language in the state’s education budget have left the program, and students hoping for school choice this coming school year, in jeopardy.

The Republican-majority Senate voted 13–11 along party lines to defeat a bill repealing the school choice law. Two Republican Senators who voted against the measure creating the tax credits switched their votes to oppose its repeal, saying rapid changes are bad policy.

The program for low- and middle-income families grants scholarships averaging $2,500 a year to choose an out-of-district public school or private school, or smaller grants for home-school expenses. The scholarship funds come from tax-deductible donations.

Aiming to Empower Families

“What we were trying to accomplish was to create a program to empower low- and middle-income families to choose the education that best fit their child’s individual needs,” said Jason Bedrick, a Cato Institute policy analyst who helped write the law.

“We wanted a program that had very light regulations, common-sense things that ensure no abuse, but didn’t interfere in the ability of private schools to conduct things as they thought best,” he said.

A long, careful process of compromise, negotiations, and a study committee made the bill one of the most vetted in the legislature’s recent history, Bedrick said.

Because Senate members had to override the governor’s veto to pass the law in spring 2012, and that fall control of the House switched back to Democrats, an attempt to repeal the law with House Bill 370 was an expected response, said Jim Forsyth, the law’s original Senate sponsor who lost his seat in 2012.

“There were very few Democrats who were willing to engage with us,” Bedrick said. “The teachers union and some of the other activists who oppose school choice know that once families have choice they don’t want to give up that choice. ... Their one chance to kill this program is before it goes into effect.”

Parent Interest

Approximately 750 children have applied for the first year of scholarships and there will likely be 1,000 applicants by June, said Kate Baker, executive director of the Network for Educational Opportunity: “So families are really excited and interested in it. Particularly as the economy gets worse, more people need help.”

The pattern in other states is relatively few applicants in a school choice program’s first year and then rapid buildup, said Senate Majority Leader J eb Bradley (R-Thornton).

“Having met some of the families with young kids who are trying to avail themselves of this opportunity, I also think if we get it up and running ... these youngsters will be the best ambassadors for the initiative,” Bradley said. “Both Republicans and Democrats have constituents who want what works.”

Most of the first-year applicants are home-school or private school students, so the credits may not be getting to kids in the public school system, said state Sen. Peggy Gilmour (D-Hollis), who wants the program repealed.

The tax credits will save the state an estimated $550,000 in the program’s first year by educating children more cheaply than public schools, according to the New Hampshire Department of Education.

Tax, Constitutionality Questions

Gilmour lists the law’s tax structure and questions about its constitutionality as major concerns.

“I wasn’t there at the time of the passage of the bill last year, so I can’t speak to the vetting process,” Gilmour said.

“What I have heard is, prior to the initiation of the repeal there were a fair number of concerns around ... the way the tax credit was structured as tax policy.”

The law’s 85 percent tax write-off “is the largest tax credit awarded in the state,” Gilmour said. “The next biggest one, which is a very old economic development one, awards 75 percent and has a lot of oversight.”

Continuing Court Battles

Just eight days after the senators saved the program, judges heard arguments in Stafford County Superior Court questioning its constitutionality for potentially sending money to religious schools.

In 2011 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled a similar Arizona law does not violate the constitution, as the private donations never enter tax coffers.

New Hampshire’s constitution prohibits the state government from granting or applying money raised by taxation to religious schools,” said Dick Komer, a senior attorney at the Institute of Justice, which is defending the law. “By using tax credits to encourage private business donations to private scholarship organizations, [the tax credit] does not use funds raised by taxation.”

The law was crafted so that if a judge does rule to remove one aspect, such as directing funds to religious schools, the rest can remain intact.

The court case will likely hit the state supreme court, Komer said.

Back-Door Repeal

Repeal language in the state’s education budget also could destroy the program.

“Our program would save the state money, so it’s somewhat counterintuitive that they would want to repeal it, from a fiscal perspective,” Baker said.

Budget negotiations will determine whether tax-credit opponents “feel so strongly about killing this program and robbing students of choice” that they’re willing to forego half a million dollars, Bedrick said.

The uncertainty and controversy have created another challenge, Baker said: “There are tons of applicants but we’ll have to work really hard to find donors.”

Peggy Gilmour
Senator - NH

“I ... think if we get it up and running ... these youngsters will be the best ambassadors for the initiative. Both Republicans and Democrats have constituents who want what works.”

JEB BRADLEY
SENATE MAJORITY LEADER
THORNTON, NEW HAMPSHIRE

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
Study Finds ‘Troubling’ Lack of U.S. History Knowledge

By Morgan Sweeney

Comedian Jay Leno periodically devotes a few minutes of his TV show to “jaywalking” segments, where he and his camera crew take to the streets and quiz passersby about basic historical facts.

Most interviewees embarrass themselves by not knowing, for example, the name of the first U.S. president.


Many Americans know U.S. students’ test scores on subjects like math and reading are low. In civics, however, they’re appalling. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a respected, voluntary nationwide test, 22 percent of students test proficient in civics and history as in other subjects, said Cheryl Miller, manager of the citizenship program at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI).

“In [an American Enterprise Institute] poll, only 56 percent of teachers agreed that ‘By graduation, virtually all students in my high school have carefully read the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.’”

“American citizenship depends on its citizens sharing some body of knowledge together about the political structure that governs their daily lives,” said report coauthor Sandra Stotsky, who led Massachusetts in developing some of the country’s best education standards in the 1990s.

Reasons for the Decline

Historical knowledge is declining in American schools, according to the paper’s authors, for several reasons. First, schools are devoting less time to history. One reason for this is that students aren’t tested as frequently or widely in civics and history as in other subjects, said Cheryl Miller, manager of the citizenship program at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI).

There is also confusion about what American history is. Over the past half-century, the history curriculum trend has been to devote just as much time to “social history,” race, gender, and the achievements of non-Western societies as to Western society and politics, Stotsky said.

“There’s not a lot of consensus about what civic education should be. That’s true of teachers; it’s true of the general public,” Miller said.

AEI recently polled 1,000 teachers on what is most important to teach in history and civics classes. Only 64 percent said high schools should teach students “to understand such concepts as federalism, separation of powers, and checks and balances.”

“That [number] is not bad,” Miller said, “but when you think about it, these are social studies teachers: If they’re not teaching it, who is?”

In that poll, only 56 percent of teachers agreed that “By graduation, virtually all students in my high school have carefully read the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.”

Teacher Trouble

Social studies certification does not guarantee a teacher will be prepared to teach history or civics, since the term “social studies” encompasses so much, the report says.

More specific requirements for teachers are the most important way to improve civic education, said Charles Quigley, executive director of the Center for Civic Education. The center has worked with schools and state boards of education across the country and in more than 80 other countries to improve civics education.

“What’s needed is knowledgeable, skilled, and dedicated teachers who have adequate background in the subject,” he said.

Losing Schools’ Original Purpose

Many Americans have forgotten we have public schools so students can become educated citizens capable of self-government, said study coauthor Robert Pondiscio.

“If you ask people, ‘Why do we send kids to school?’ they’ll say, ‘Well, it’s so kids can get good jobs,’” he said.

Pondiscio finds that troubling. That’s why he recently moved to a new nonprofit organization, Citizenship First. It aims at “reviving the public purpose of education as citizenship.”

Like Democracy Prep charter schools in Harlem, where Citizenship First will soon operate, some charter schools are developing curricula to address students’ widespread lack of civic knowledge.

In 2010, 45 states adopted Common Core State Standards for education – without public debate or appropriate scrutiny. Now many states are having second thoughts. This booklet by Joy Pullmann, research fellow for The Heartland Institute, explains why Common Core is a bad choice for America.

Free online at heartland.org/issues/education or call 312/377-4000.
States Respond to Common Core Science Standards

By Joy Pullmann

States have begun to take sides on the new Common Core science standards released in mid-April. The standards shift students toward engineering and away from traditional biology, chemistry, and physics disciplines. And they tell children starting in kindergarten that humans have caused dangerous global warming.

“This is a very big victory for the other side,” said Craig Rucker, executive director of the Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow, a nonprofit organization that promotes free-market environmental stewardship. “If you start inculcating these ideas into the young, they will view this as a statement of faith, and it becomes very difficult to convince them otherwise—which is why the proponents of climate change are doing it.”

Despite this political hot potato, some analysts say they expect 40 or more states to switch to the standards, which are designed to correspond to Common Core math and English standards 45 states have adopted.

“Texas and Utah education leaders have said their states will not adopt the standards, but states such as California, Kansas, and Michigan are holding hearings on them soon. The state boards of education in Kentucky and Maine have said they plan to vote on the standards by June. Florida and Pennsylvania officials told FoxNews.com they had no meetings scheduled to review the standards, while Illinois and Tennessee leaders said it’s likely their states will switch to the new standards soon.

No Debate

The Next Generation Science Standards, as they’re called, were coordinat-
ed by Achieve Inc., which also coordinat-
ed Common Core English and math. Achieve worked with approximately 13 federal agencies, including NASA, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the U.S. Department of the Interior, said Frank Niepold, co-chair of the Climate Education Interagency Working Group at the U.S. Global Change Research Program.

“Federal agencies are committed to lifting as much of this as we can in partnership with the states,” he said.

On a conference call in April, Niepold celebrated the standards for their potential to force the nation’s schools to teach his view of climate change.

“Our hope is that teachers will not see this as a political issue and a politi-
cal debate,” said Mario Molina, deputy director of the Alliance for Climate Education, on the same call. “This is the science. It is not a debate. This is [students’] right, to be taught the science that is agreed upon worldwide without the veil of politics or debate.”

Although some teachers are currently “worried about the sensitivities of the parents and community” regarding climate change, said Don Boesch, principal investigator for the Maryland and Delaware Climate Change Education, Assessment, and Research program, “shifting the textbooks” and standards would provide teachers the support they need to stand up to disgruntled parents, students, and taxpayers.

Goal: Political Power

The false claim that the climate debate is settled has been pushed ever since climate became a hot political topic in the 1990s, Rucker said.

“The only place you usually see 98 percent of anyone agreeing is a place like Venezuela or the former Soviet Union,” Rucker said. “People do not agree on climate science. You have a large number of different opinions as to what man’s contribution is, how much is a result of natural variability, and so forth. The claims they’re making are preposterous. Of course there’s a debate.”

Rucker says it’s common for global warming alarmists to say that even if global warming is not a problem, the big-government solutions they propose are necessary worldwide anyway. If children are taught to think this way, he said, when they start voting they are likely to favor big-government politicians. Schools should not push students towards particular politics, he said.

Good for Science?

Climate change is a good topic to prioritize in education because it brings together various fields of science, Niepold said.

Heather Mac Donald disagrees. She is a fellow at the Manhattan Institute who says she’s “not a climate skeptic.”

“The most critical need for students is to understand basic science, and we are so far from achieving that goal that I think it’s a distraction to start immersing students in the extraordinary complexities of climate science,” she said. “It is following the fad for interdisciplinary work, and the people who promote that forget they went through the disciplines themselves and that those disciplines represent real bodies of knowledge. We have to be absolutely certain that students understand the rudiments.”

Sixty-eight percent of U.S. eighth-graders scored below “proficient” in science on the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress, the most respected nationwide test, in 2011.

Thomas B. Fordham Institute reviewers of the science standards’ most recent draft agreed with Mac Donald. “[R]ecommended ‘practices’ dominate [the standards], and basic science knowledge—which should be the ultimate goal of science education—becomes secondary,” they wrote.

They also criticized the loss of crucial science content, such as acids and bases in chemistry, and flat-out inaccuracies.

“The passion for ‘critical thinking skills’ grows out of this know-nothing response that somehow learning facts is demeaning and is something that students don’t enjoy,” Mac Donald said. “It sells knowledge short to think that being able to master a body of knowledge and understand photosynthesis or DNA replication, that that’s not a challenge and exciting for students.”

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is a research fellow of The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
Kansas Law Lets Teachers Choose Political Donations

By Ben DeGrow

A labor expert is praising a new Kansas law for promoting teachers’ freedom to make informed political choices and opinion polls show strong public support for it, including among union members and government employees.

Gov. Sam Brownback (R) signed House Bill 2022 into law on April 1, enacting a policy often referred to as “paycheck protection” for all Kansas employees.

“It could have been stronger,” said Paul Kersey, director of labor policy for the Illinois Policy Institute. “But with Kansas already having a right-to-work protection” for all Kansas employees.

“We think it’s important teachers are aware of where their dollars are going. Teachers should be able to fund whatever political candidate they support.”

GARY SIGLE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
KANSAS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN EDUCATORS

Committee, Gary Sigle, executive director of the Kansas Association of American Educators, told of his encounters with “teachers that are unaware that their union dues are going to political activity.” One recently contacted him, prompted by the public debate over HB 2022, to discover the union’s political spending habits.

“We think it’s important teachers are aware of where their dollars are going,” Sigle said. “Teachers should be able to fund whatever political candidate they support.”

Bill supporters say the paycheck protection law reflects public opinion in the state.

“Plurality support for paycheck protection covered all age groups, political parties, regions, and income levels. Government employees and union members likewise favored the arrangement of collecting only nonpolitical dues money. “Employees are still free to set up a direct draft from their bank accounts,” Trabert said. “What we’ll have to see is how many employees change their minds.”

Narrowed Approach

The policy is narrowly targeted at how unions collect political funds. A broader prohibition on the use of government payroll systems would likely drain union campaign coffers and also their general dues revenue.

“In the states that lost payroll deduction, if I had to make a general rule I’d say they lose about 30 percent of their membership,” National Education Association President Dennis Van Roekel recently told a group of fellow union leaders.

As originally introduced, HB 2022 would have barred government employees’ unions from lobbying lawmakers and testifying before legislative committees. Senate Commerce Committee Chairwoman Julia Lynn (R-Olathe) deleted that provision to get the votes to pass the bill.

Ben DeGrow (ben@i2i.org) is senior education policy analyst for the Independence Institute, a free-market think tank in Denver, Colorado.
The Michigan House of Representatives passed a budget bill prohibiting the state department of education from using state money to implement the Common Core national education standards and associated tests. The Senate now must pass a budget, then both versions must be reconciled in a conference committee that will likely meet in late May, said state Rep. Tom McMillin (R-Rochester Hills). He sponsored the Common Core budget amendment and is sponsoring House Bill 4276 to withdraw Michigan completely from Common Core. HB 4276 awaits a vote from the House Education Committee after a March hearing.

“I didn’t really get any pushback [from fellow legislators] with the idea that before we turn over our standards to a private entity shouldn’t we have a vote on that?” McMillin told School Reform News the day of the House vote, April 24. The state budget bill does not preclude local districts from using state money to implement Common Core.

The impact on schools would vary by district but “could range from districts not aligning their curriculum and teachers not incorporating elements into lesson plans to full implementation,” said Jan Ellis, spokeswoman for the Michigan Department of Education, in an email. The department would need to develop, at great cost, new standards and assessments aligned to those standards.”

Who’s the Boss?
Common Core lists what children should know in math and English from kindergarten through grade 12. Michigan’s state board of education unanimously traded Michigan’s standards for Common Core two weeks after it was released in June 2010. The board was also set to have Michigan trade its state tests for national Common Core tests called Smarter Balanced in 2014.

However, McMillin said, the state board of education doesn’t have the authority to set education standards. The legislature does.

“We’re debating some standards in committee today on career-technical education. We don’t have this discussion if Common Core is in place,” McMillin said. “We have to go hat in hand to the [National Governors Association, which holds the Common Core copyright] and beg them to change the standards. They have a body that is not subject to freedom of information and open meetings acts. A private entity deciding what will be taught in all our public schools is just wrong.”

Even so, right after the hearing on HB 4276, the board reaffirmed its support for Common Core.

“The Common Core State Standards were adopted to increase student career- and college-readiness, level the global academic playing field, and are being implemented by districts across the state,” Ellis said.

“This is one step in the legislative appropriations process, and we will continue to work with both the House and Senate to build better understanding of the importance of the Common Core standards for the students and the future of Michigan.”

Costly Delays
The Senate’s version of the budget also includes an amendment saying the state department of education cannot use state money to “develop” Common Core standards. Although that would do little to stall Common Core in Michigan because the standards are already developed, it does mean “with the Senate saying there’s an issue there and our amendment very solid, we have a strong shot,” McMillin said.

Michigan’s legislature is in session year-round. That means HB 4276 will not be termed out in a few months and there is more time to hold hearings on it, McMillin said. Michigan’s department of Education will also likely push for legislators to address the topic, McMillin said.

The longer Michigan waits to decide its course of action, the more expensive both courses get and the more taxpayers will pay for an unproven experiment, he said. During the HB 4276 hearing, back-envelope estimates of the cost to implement Common Core varied and no one had a clear answer.

“Even so, right after the hearing on HB 4276, the board reaffirmed its support for Common Core.”

McMillin said. “That’s disturbing in itself. We ought to know it, and then decide.”

TOM McMILLIN, STATE REPRESENTATIVE
ROCHESTER HILLS, MICHIGAN

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is a research fellow of The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
How Tennessee Voucher Push Lost Its Momentum

By Ashley Bateman

Years of voucher proposals, polls showing parent support for vouchers, and a governor-sponsored voucher bill did not culminate in a new Tennessee voucher law this spring.

Despite a positive response from legislators early on, the lawmaker carrying Gov. Bill Haslam’s (R) 2013 voucher bill withdrew it, citing Haslam’s objections to other legislators’ attempts to expand his proposal.

Disagreement over Scope

Haslam wanted vouchers initially available only to 5,000 low-income kids attending the state’s worst schools. That caused discontent among voucher proponents who saw the governor’s bill as too small. State Sen. Brian Kelsey (R-Germantown), who has supported several voucher bills in the past, hoped to amend Haslam’s bill into a bigger program, and state Sen. Dolores Gresham (R-Somerville) released a separate plan allowing in 10,000 kids initially, letting families of four earning up to $75,000 qualify, and allowing voucher recipients to come from other than state-designated “failing schools.”

“I had originally hoped for a statewide bill,” Kelsey said. “Some legislators support opportunity scholarships only if children in their districts are eligible, and others support them only if their districts are excluded.”

Tennessee has no private school choice program and it allows only limited charter schools and online education. A 2012 poll found 59 percent of Tennessee voters support vouchers. Twenty-seven and 28 percent of Tennessee fourth-graders scored proficient in reading and math, respectively, on the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress. On average, Tennessee students score below national NAEP averages.

“Shocking, Disappointing”

Attempts to amend the governor’s proposal were the real sticking point, said Haslam spokesman David Smith.

“We took it off notice because … we wanted this bill to be considered on its merit,” Smith said. “We wanted separate bills, other proposals, to be considered separately.”

School choice proponents were disappointed by the lack of compromise.

“We certainly expected a discussion,” said Jeff Reed, a spokesman for the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice. “Shocking and disappointing are the only words to describe what the governor did. To not even let the bill be voted on is particularly a shame for families. Families who are not satisfied with the quality of their schools now have to wait.”

Haslam’s bill was withdrawn before it even received a public hearing, noted Trey Moore, policy director for the Beacon Center of Tennessee.

Separate Bills, Separate Consideration

Although the governor says he merely insisted on keeping voucher proposals separate, his actions precluded any bill from consideration, Moore said.

“Despite what the governor said about not standing in our way, [three Republicans on the House subcommittee] said they couldn’t support a broader bill at the same time as the governor’s bill,” Moore said.

He noted, “The House Education Committee chairman was working against a broader bill in favor of the governor’s bill. We had the votes all along in the Senate. We thought we were negotiating in good faith.”

 Attempted Amendments

School choice proponents decided to trade their wish for bigger or no caps on the program for an amendment lifting the requirement that voucher recipients come only from failing schools, Moore said.

“We caved on the size and just focused on the structure. We decided as a coalition if we couldn’t get that failing-school revision we’d be better off with no bill,” Moore said.

Expanding the voucher cap would have gotten the bill better support in the House, Kelsey said.

“I had hoped that the governor would be willing to negotiate over such minor changes,” Kelsey said.

Failing Schools vs. Everyone

In 2012, Haslam appointed a task force to study and propose voucher legislation.

“As a result of that process the governor believed his proposal … was the best fit with the state’s overall education reform efforts,” Smith said.

Voucher proponents on the task force repeatedly stressed vouchers should be open to all students, not just those zoned into the state’s worst 5 percent of schools, Moore said.

But in the governor’s bill, “only kids in a bottom 5 percent schools [were eligible],” Moore said. “If you’re dead set on going with a failing schools bill, you have to at least go with an A-F grading system.”

Programs giving vouchers only to students attending schools rated a certain way, as in Florida and Ohio, “are very difficult to navigate for parents,” Reed said. “School grades can change. If you base it fully on income, you know right away whether you qualify.”

Research shows bigger reforms yield bigger results, Reed said. A very small reform measure has less chance of widespread success.

“Absolutely kids in failing schools deserve a choice,” Reed said. “This is not a philosophical difference, but to do what works.”

Future Prospects Murky

Kelsey said he will sponsor another voucher bill in 2014, for the ninth year in a row.

“My primary concern has always been to ensure that all low-income, urban children will be covered by the program,” Kelsey said. “I expect that Tennessee will be able to pass a compromise bill next year.”

But with an election year approaching, Reed said legislators may not stand behind a voucher bill unless the governor takes the lead.

Haslam is less certain of a voucher bill passing next session.

“The governor believes in his bill and that it is the right way to go, but next year is a long way away,” Smith said.

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
North Carolina Questions Common Core Standards

By Rachel Sheffield

North Carolina legislators have introduced a proposal that would require their state to examine national Common Core education standards.

Over the past few years, North Carolina and 44 other states signed on to the Common Core, a list detailing what children should know in math and English for grades K-12. About a dozen states are now taking a second look as policymakers and citizens raise concerns.

North Carolina’s proposed legislation “would authorize lawmakers to create a study committee that would ask questions [about the Common Core] that have not been answered to anyone’s satisfaction,” said Terry Stoops, director of education studies at the John Locke Foundation.

Those questions include, “Are Common Core standards quality standards? How much will it cost to implement common standards and tests? How do teachers and school-based administrators feel about Common Core?” and others, Stoops said.

States’ Rights

One of the major critiques of Common Core is that it is not “state-led” but rather an attempt to centralize control of standards and curriculum. Many North Carolina leaders believe this, Stoops said.

“Others are convinced that common standards and tests will propel North Carolina’s public schools into the upper echelons of international academic stardom,” he said.

State Rep. Hugh Blackwell (R-Valdese), who is sponsoring the study proposal, says he introduced it because “it is important to preserve North Carolina’s rights and prerogatives in determining education policy. Education policy should not be ceded to the federal government nor to some sort of pseudo-national organization.”

Common Core was sponsored by the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers, both private lobbying associations in Washington, DC.

Moving to Common Core “removes local control of curriculum away from parents, teachers, administrators, and the school board,” said Elizabeth Lankford, a North Carolina mother.

Other Considerations

The cost of implementing the standards is another concern. Lankford says expenses would total $576 million for North Carolina. She also questions the standards’ quality.

“I do not believe that it is responsible to use students as guinea pigs,” Lankford said. “The Common Core Standards are untested and unproven. There are members of the validation committee who refused to sign off on the Common Core State Standards. From what I’ve read, these people feel that the standards are not the rigorous ones promised.”

She says some of Common Core’s shortcomings include “reduced amounts of literature in favor of informational texts, not teaching conversion of fractions to decimals, and delaying the teaching of algebra.”

Blackwell says his proposal has a good chance of passing. Stoops says there is solid support for it but no guarantee.

“The anti-Common Core movement in North Carolina is not as organized as it is in other states in the region,” he notes. However, he said, if legislators fail to approve this “relatively innocuous” proposal “they will anger an active and growing constituency of Common Core opponents in our state.”

Rachel Sheffield (rachel.sheffield@heritage.org) is an education research assistant at The Heritage Foundation.

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Poll: 57% of Public Against Government Preschool

By Shelby Sims

While government preschool programs have expanded greatly in the past decade, a new poll finds 57 percent of Americans believe parents, not the government, should pay for preschool.

Thirty-two percent said taxpayers should pay for preschool in the Reason-Rupe May 2013 poll.

When framed another way: “President Obama has proposed expanding government preschool programs, however only 37 percent of Americans favor raising taxes to create a universal preschool system, while 61 percent oppose,” the poll summary noted.

The poll interviewed 1,003 adults on topics ranging from government to athletics and birth control to education.

Seventy-four percent of respondents said American society should view equally “a parent who chooses to scale back his or her career to spend more time raising their children or a parent who chooses to fully pursue his or her career while raising their children.”

When asked if it is necessary “for parents of small children to make compromises in their careers to effectively raise children,” 80 percent said such compromises are necessary and 13 percent said they are unnecessary.

Shelby Sims (shelbydeni@gmail.com) writes from Fort Wayne, Indiana.

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By Joy Pullmann

A central defense of the new national education standards, now generating spirited public debates, is that the federal government did not mandate or create them.

“The Common Core State Standards Initiative is a state-led effort that established a single set of clear educational standards for kindergarten through 12th grade in English language arts and mathematics,” the official Common Core Web site states.

In 2009, two nonprofit, nongovernmental organizations—the National Governors Association (NGA) and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)—convened government officials and dozens of consultants to write, rewrite, and, in June 2010, publish Common Core.

Five months later, 44 states had agreed to trade their K-12 math and English targets and tests for Common Core’s. Those standards are now moving into 87 percent of public school classrooms and reshaping textbooks and tests for even states and schools that did not elect Common Core. National Common Core tests, funded exclusively by the federal government, come out in 2014–15.

Taxpayer Dollars Dominate

Previous School Reform News reports have revealed state and federal tax money provide approximately half of CCSSO’s operating funds, and funds from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have supported this behind-closed-doors process. NGA receives an even bigger proportion of its operating funds from tax dollars.

The NGA’s Center for Best Practices, the nonprofit arm of NGA that shares “a common pool of cash and investments,” reports on its 2010 IRS 990 form it received 80 percent of its $14.8 million annual income from taxpayers. Tax documents also show that back in 2004, the earliest available documents traced, NGA received $31 million from taxpayers. Tax funding has made up most of NGA’s income every year in between.

Approximately half of NGA’s tax-provided revenue comes from the federal government; the other half comes from membership dues states pay. In its latest financial statement showing $16.9 million in total revenue for 2011–12, $4.9 million of that came from the federal government, $5.5 million from states, and another $3 million from corporate sponsors.

School Reform News contacted NGA for information about its finances and Common Core work. A spokeswoman referred all significant questions to NGA’s communications director, then did not respond to several follow-up requests.

To Vote or Not to Vote

Despite its heavy tax support, NGA is not required to make public its meetings, votes, and materials, as government bodies must do, and it has not done so for its work on Common Core.

NGA is a private trade organization whose actions are not legally binding on states. Governors vote during NGA’s two annual meetings to express shared priorities, former Virginia governor George Allen told School Reform News, but “by the time they vote on a position the [resolutions] get watered down so much any objections are already accommodated. It’s unlike legislatures, with committee hearings and votes.”

Even so, NGA has not released what, if any, resolution governors voted on in 2009 to authorize its subsequent Common Core work. Nor has it released the vote tally.

Not All Governors Involved

Even if governors do vote on vague resolutions that have no legal power, not all attend NGA meetings. The NGA spokeswoman would say only “we consider all governors members of the association,” but five governors have publicly withdrawn membership and refused to pay dues. These are from Florida, Maine, North Dakota, South Carolina, and Texas, and all are Republicans. Only one is from a state that has refused Common Core: those are Alaska, Nebraska, Texas, and Virginia.

Spokesmen for the abstaining governors all essentially said NGA membership provided too little benefit for the money.

Texas “Gov. [Rick] Perry knows and works with governors all over the nation on a variety of different issues that are important to Texas and our country as a whole,” spokesman Josh Havens said. “We didn’t feel that active membership was a smart use of taxpayer funds.”

Texas governors have not been NGA members since 2003, he said. Before that, the state’s NGA dues ran $125,000 to $150,000 per year. Idaho suspended its membership in 2009 for financial reasons; in 2013 it resumed paying about $40,000 for membership and $30,000 for travel to meetings, said Jon Hanian, a spokesman for Gov. Butch Otter (R).

“This governor is a strong believer in the Tenth Amendment and state’s rights, and he believes states are the laboratory of the republic,” Hanian said. “He values sharing his experience as well as sharing [the] experience of other governors as he crafts public policy. When there have been attempts to have national policies to the detriment of the Tenth Amendment, he’s viewed his role as a counterbalance.”

Automatic Membership

When other journalists have asked NGA about governors who want no part in NGA, spokesmen have responded essentially by saying governors cannot choose to leave. When Maine Gov. Paul LePage (R) pulled out of NGA in 2012— telling the Bangor Daily News, “I get no value out of those meetings. They are too politically correct and everybody is lovey-dovey and no decisions are ever made”—NGA’s communications director responded by saying all governors are NGA members even if they don’t pay dues.

She declined to say which states pay dues and why the dues vary.

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Arkansas Decides to Study, Not Pass, School Vouchers

By Isabel Lyman

The Arkansas House Education Committee voted to have an interim committee study a school voucher bill rather than pass it directly.

At a large rally at the state capitol on the day of the vote, organized by Arkansas Parents for School Choice, attendees sported bright yellow and blue t-shirts. Bill sponsor state Rep. Randy Alexander (R-Fayetteville) addressed them saying, “Taxpayer funds—public funds—come from you. It’s your money. They’re your kids.

“Parent choice is important,” he said. “Parent choice can make a difference. We’re not here to attack any particular form of education. But we would be naive if we believed that within every form of education every school provided an outstanding education.”

House Bill 1897 would have allowed eligible students to direct 92 percent of state K-12 per-pupil funding or $6,267 per student, to a participating school, be it public, charter, magnet, alternative, or private. If the Parental Choice Scholarship Program Act had been approved, a pilot initiative would have begun in fall 2014. Students in grades 4-8 and enrolled in schools that had 1,000 students or more could have participated in the pilot.

Alexander proposed the legislation, in part, to address the lagging academic performance of Arkansas students in comparison with pupils in other states. As he pointed out in the bill and during the April committee hearing, Education Week has given Arkansas a grade of F for funding but a D on K-12 student achievement for the past five years.

Famous Father Weighs In

Former Arkansas state representative Jim Bob Duggar, star of the TLC television show “19 Kids and Counting,” agrees with Alexander.

“Back when the phone companies had a monopoly, technology was stifled,” he told School Reform News. “Once competition was introduced, the open marketplace developed innovation [and] free enterprise spawned private investors and companies to rapidly outdo their competition, which eventually led to the creation of iPhones and smart phones.”

Duggar continued, “Allowing families to decide what education is best for their children will encourage a friendly competition that will inspire educators and families to make sure each child receives the best education possible.”

Debating HB 1897

During the committee hearing on HB 1897, Arkansas native and Black Alliance for Educational Options board member Virginia Walden Ford shared a personal anecdote about how school choice changed her family for the better.

Several years ago her 13-year-old son, William, entered a public middle school “behind three grade levels ... feeling inadequate.” But his life took a dramatic turn when he received unexpected help.

“Suddenly out of nowhere we were offered the opportunity to have tuition paid for him at any school that I chose,” she said. “Within weeks” at his new parochial school, her son began to thrive, Walden Ford said. Eventually he graduated valedictorian and served in the U.S. Marine Corps.

Arkansas Commissioner of Education Tom Kimbrell worried private schools would not appreciate state intrusion.

“The bill] says that the Department of Education would have to approve those [participating] schools,” Kimbrell said. “My friends that are private school operators tell me they don’t want me in their business. That’s an issue that is not defined in this law.”

Committee members also raised concerns about special-needs students, transportation funding, measurable assessments, and private school accreditation.

An Arkansas Democrat-Gazette editorial strongly supported the bill. The newspaper even took a shot at school boards and superintendents who oppose education reform: “Many of them act as though the state’s education dollars are a jobs program for teachers and staff and administrators. Can we have lost sight of something here? Like the students and the best way to educate them?”

To Be Continued

Despite the setback, Arkansas school choice supporters remain positive. Arkansas Parents for School Choice posted this message on its Facebook page two days after the vote: “Although the bill did not successfully make it out of committee, we feel like we made a huge step forward in the advancement of school choice for the state of Arkansas.”

Isabel Lyman writes from Petoskey, Michigan.

Indiana Governor Hits Common Core Pause Button

By Joy Pullmann

Indiana Gov. Mike Pence signed a bill to reconsider Common Core national education standards and analyze its costs.

“My only bias is that we’re going to do education the Indiana way,” Pence told WIBC FM. “We’re going to set our curriculum for Indiana in Indiana.”

Common Core lists what every child must know in K-12 math and English. Forty-five states traded their state standards and tests for it. House Bill 1427 would require a cost analysis and public hearings before the state continues putting it into place. Currently, Common Core operates in Indiana’s kindergarten and first-grade classrooms.

Sitting on the Bill

In five days in April, nearly a thousand Indianaans and a coalition of 55 organizations signed a letter to Pence requesting that he stand against Common Core. They also asked Pence to replace current state board of education members, whom the governor appoints, with ones who oppose the Core.

“We were outspent and outmanned, but the will of the People prevailed which proves the system can work,” said Erin Tuttle, co-founder of Hoosiers Against Common Core, in a statement.

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PODCAST INFO

Vern Williams: A Teacher’s Thoughts on the Common Core: http://news.heartland.org/podcasts/2012/12/14/vern-williams-teachers-thoughts-common-core
It’s Time to Make Teaching a Real Profession

By Carl Olson

Teachers have somehow gotten themselves exempt from public accountability as a profession, avoiding independent requirements like those imposed on doctors, nurses, accountants, and others. The results for 60 million students, their parents, and the general public has been dismaying for too long.

This defect has been fostered by the main teacher labor unions, the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers.

Hair stylists, barbers, plumbers, doctors, nurses, certified public accountants, etc., are all accountable professions regulated by state agencies. They are accustomed to this licensing regime, which has operated for decades. The agencies set minimum education or training standards, investigate complaints, and impose discipline.

But labor union lobbyists have diluted state teacher licensing requirements, keeping teachers free of responsibility to meet minimum standards. Mississippi Gov. Phil Bryant’s proposal to require prospective teachers to earn at least a 3.0 GPA and above-average ACT score was refused by the state College Board because it would disqualify half the young people currently studying to teach. Other education professions have also gained similar exemptions: principals, administrators, superintendents, librarians, counselors, clerks, custodians, etc.

Their labor unions have worked their power so far: The average elementary school teacher has a math and verbal SAT score of 960, below the national average of 1,000. If we are going to license professions, this taxpayer-financed one should be held to high standards.

Requests to fire incompetent, dangerous, or abusive teachers should remove them pronto. Right now, however, under union rules it takes years for that, with the accused teacher receiving pay for doing nothing in the meantime.

School board member Tamar Galatzan of the Los Angeles Unified School District compiled the 80 (yes, 80) steps needed to fire a teacher. The final decision was left to a three-member committee in Sacramento, two of whom were union appointees.

NEA and AFT publications do not include anything substantial about teaching improvements or evaluations. NEA and AFT conventions do not have any substantial resolutions, seminars, breakout session, exhibits, and so on about teaching improvements or evaluations.

Professions have generally established “best practices” of proven procedures and standards. After 150 years of government schools, no “best practices” have been established. This is a shameful failing.

One century-old teacher group is dedicated to advancing the teacher profession: Phi Delta Kappa International has numerous chapters, publications, and meetings. It deserves more attention.

The education industry is the biggest spender of state and local tax dollars, consuming about half of them. Accountability for teachers and other education personnel must start with state legislators and governors, who should hold the education industry to professional standards like other professions. The federal government should do likewise in the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, other U.S. territories, and the Department of Defense K-12 schools that employ thousands of teachers and other staff.

The result can only improve the instruction of the 60 million schoolchildren who are currently shortchanged.

Carl Olson (olson@lafn.org) is founder of Textbook Trust, an adjunct professor of accounting, and member of the California Federation of Teachers.

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**States Explore Alternatives to Standardized Testing**

**By Evelyn B. Stacey**

Online schools, mobile technology, and independent students are beginning to bring promising innovations to the heart of modern education: standardized testing.

There is growing restlessness about standardized testing and teaching methods. Texas, for instance, is currently debating reducing the number of high school end-of-course exams from 15 to five. Innovators are looking into other ways to measure learning. Parents across the country are opting their children out of testing altogether, some even resorting to proclaiming the tests violate their religion. In Pennsylvania, parents can use broad religious and ethical waivers to excuse their children from participation.

“Uniform measures create a powerful incentive to move toward uniform behavior,” said Jason Bedrick, an education policy analyst at the Cato Institute, in an email to *School Reform News*. “No one test or system of measurement can fully capture what a student has learned or can accomplish, which is why having multiple measurements is wise.”

**Portable Portfolios**

The ideas that could take the place of testing in the future could appear soon in schools. The most notable is the portfolio concept. Using portfolios to measure students’ work and knowledge has been tossed around for years and it has been condemned as a “squishy,” non-objective form of measurement. But now the widely available interactive mobile Internet makes the idea more realistic.

One example is Knowit, a Web site and app that share students’ work. They call it an “e-portfolio.” It lets students upload and display everything they’ve made—papers, videos, Web sites, record-ings, etc.

**Digital Badges**

Another innovation is called digital badges. These are similar to badges Boy Scouts earn for mastering a skill.

“Badges are an alternative form of credentialing—it is to show you mastered something. It doesn’t call for a different type of assessment. It is more to replace the demand for higher education and add more career tech for high school,” explained testing researcher Richard Phelps, founder of the Nonpartisan Education Review. “I was a Boy Scout and got lots of badges. Since you are choosing what to study, it is the opposite of how you learn in school.”

The badges can credential small units of knowledge such as two-digit addition, or larger chunks such as Algebra I.

“My prediction for the future is that students will have more opportunities to show what they know with badges like Mozilla Open Badges, BadgeStack, Uboost, and products like Knowit,” said Lisa Nielsen, a popular blogger at *The Innovative Educator* and author of *Teaching Generation Text*.

Digital badges are especially appropriate for hands-on or skills-based learning, which is beginning to proliferate outside traditional education. Felicita Sullivan, a senior researcher with the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement and author of *New Alternative Assessments, Digital Badges and Civics*, describes them as “new models for learning that can demonstrate competency without a formal or standardized test.”

Badges can apply to all ages and to both informal and formal education. An example is Code Academy, a Web site where visitors can earn points toward a badge in computer coding. The grand-daddy of online badges is sponsored by the Mozilla Foundation, the open-source Internet network.

**Open Debate**

Such innovations could help resolve the decades-old debate over testing, Bedrick says.

“Different students respond differently to various types of testing or measurement,” he explained. “These realities should induce us to resist any effort to impose standardized testing, which would impede innovative efforts to measure student performance.”

Lawmakers in both parties tend to argue a uniform system of measurement, such as testing, is needed to provide public accountability for the billions of dollars taxpayers spend on education. Sullivan thinks both accountability and diversity are possible.

“The important thing is for the learning outcome to be defined and to be clear about what indicates accomplishment of that outcome,” said Sullivan. “In this way badges and technology-enabled learning may complement or replace existing methods and assessments. But any learning, assessment, and credentialing regime needs to be proven to be effective.”

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**LEARN MORE**


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**Idaho Senate Committee**

**By Rachel Sheffield**

The Idaho House of Representatives approved its first private school choice proposal 35–33, only to have a Senate committee reject it 7–2 in April.

The proposal would have allowed individuals and corporations to receive a tax credit for donations to nonprofit organizations that grant K-12 scholarships. Students whose families make up to $63,900 for a family of four would have been eligible for the scholarships.

Although the bill fell short of passage, the votes represent progress, said Wayne Hoffman, executive director of the Idaho Freedom Foundation.

“Last year, the bill only advanced to the House floor,” he said. “This year we got a positive floor vote and the measure made it to the Senate. As people begin to realize the importance of this legislation and what it means for student achievement and advancement, they begin to embrace the idea.”

Idaho’s constitution bans sending public money to religious institutions, but courts including the U.S. Supreme Court have ruled education tax credits are private, not public, money.

**Choice ‘Benefits All’**

Hoffman says the tax-credit plan was designed to “open the full spectrum of education choice to Idaho students.” Even though Idaho has traditional public schools, charter schools, online schools, home schools, and private schools, “the last of those options is out of
Charter School Bill Passes Kentucky Senate, Fails House

By Mary Petrides Tillotson

A limited bill to introduce charter schools in Kentucky passed the state’s Senate but failed in the House.

Kentucky has almost no school choice, unless families can afford private school tuition or higher property taxes in a school district they prefer. Senate Bill 176 was the “most successful to date” school choice bill, said Richard Innes, an education analyst at the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions.

“Most of these bills, if they’re going to do something good for education, get blocked by the teachers union and the House,” Innes said.

The Need for Reform

Of the 18 low-performing schools in Louisville’s Jefferson County, 16 have shown almost no improvements in the past three years, despite re-staffing and other changes. Realistically, the schools’ only remaining options are to close or have the state take them over.

“We wanted to provide a third option to those schools, which would be charter schools,” said bill sponsor state Sen. Mike Wilson (R-Bowling Green).

Under the bill, if 20 percent of a school’s staff signed a petition, they would vote, or if parents or guardians representing 20 percent of the students signed a petition, parents would vote. In either case, a two-thirds majority vote would be required to convert the public school into a charter school under supervision of the local school board. The measure would have applied only to persistently low-achieving schools not already engaged in interventions to improve.

Only 41 schools—those in the lowest 5 percent, including the Jefferson County 18—would be eligible.

Such a charter school would not be subject to union contracts, and with a good principal and staff the school could more easily improve, Innes said.

“It’s quite restrictive, but it would have been a start in the right direction. We didn’t take that baby step, unfortunately,” Innes said.

The People vs. the System

Though citizens from Jefferson County have been lobbying for charter schools for years, Wilson said, most educators and superintendents oppose charter schools. Wilson said he spoke with several educators who told him they were “fine with” the bill.

“We thought that the way the bill was written, that it would only apply to low-performing schools, we thought we might have a shot at being able to pass that, to provide an additional option for low-performing schools,” Wilson said. “I thought we’d taken care of a lot of the opposition.”

School choice has long been a difficult sell in Kentucky. Innes said.

“The teachers union is absolutely, vehemently opposed to it, and the teachers union owns the Kentucky House,” he said. “We’ve had charter school bills proposed before. They always died in the House.”

Kentuckians tend to be suspicious of anything resembling a privileged class structure, including schools, Innes said. Though charter schools are publicly funded schools, teachers unions attempt to paint them as private schools.

“Most of the charter schools are serving poor and inner-city kids around the country,” he said.

Charter schools receive public funding and must comply with basic state and federal regulations but are free to choose curriculum, teaching staff, and structures such as the school day, in exchange for the prospect of closure if they fail students.

Family Involvement Key

It doesn’t make sense to give a choice to parents who aren’t involved in education anyway, said Jefferson County school board member David Jones Jr.

“I don’t view charters as particularly relevant to solving the root cause of JCPS’ lowest-achieving students,” he said in a statement.

He blames lack of parental involvement in education.

“Some parents are overwhelmed by poverty or homelessness; others can’t cope with the complexity of the system and are given the short straw,” he said. “Whatever the cause, our system collects the kids whose families don’t engage successfully with schools, disproportionately, in the lowest-performing schools.”

Without involved parents, students don’t complete homework and are often absent, he said. Unstable families mean students change schools frequently.

One of the main benefits charters offer is to engage parents by requiring them to pick their child’s school, Innes said.

The Jefferson County School Board has opposed charter schools for several years, said Ben Jackey, the district’s spokesman.

Mary Petrides Tillotson (mary.c.tillotson@gmail.com), a former Michigan reporter, now writes from Front Royal, Virginia.
Standardized Testing May Undermine School Choice

By Jason Bedrick

As Georgia’s legislature considers a bill to expand the state’s scholarship tax-credit program and increase transparency, some are calling for additional regulations. Writing in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Adam Emerson of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute argued the Peach State should require private schools that accept scholarship students to administer standardized tests. That would be a mistake.

Emerson contends parents, educators, and policymakers “deserve to compare the gains that students make in different school environments.” Test scores can be a useful, albeit limited, method of comparing the academic effectiveness of different schools.

Under the current system, parents are free to choose private schools that administer standardized tests and avoid those that do not or vice-versa. Likewise, donors are free to direct their money to scholarship organizations that fund only schools that do or do not administer standardized tests.

Financial Pressure

A testing mandate would severely limit or even eliminate those choices. Parents concerned about the “teach to the test” phenomenon or whose children react negatively to testing, and educators who believe standardized testing blocks real learning, will have little choice but to participate in the standardized testing regime, as even Emerson acknowledges.

Emerson argues the vast majority of private schools would still participate in the scholarship tax-credit program even with a testing mandate. He cites a recent Fordham study of regulation in school choice programs showing “only 3 percent of non-participating schools cited governmental regulations as the most important reason to opt out.”

That’s exactly the problem. The mandate would force private schools to choose between eschewing both the tests and all the students who need scholarships to attend their school, or accepting both. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of schools succumb to the financial pressure.

Researchers tend to support testing mandates because they allow them to evaluate the effectiveness of certain reforms, to an extent. But the act of measurement itself can distort the very thing they are trying to measure. Even aside from cheating scandals, the tests create strong incentives for teachers to teach differently so their students perform well on the test. Of course, some will argue, “That’s not a bug, that’s a feature!” They support standardized tests as a means of increasing accountability to government.

Suppressing Diversity

Standardized tests are not the only way to measure learning. Supporters of standardized testing know that, but they want uniform measures so they can compare apples to apples. The problem is that uniform measures create a powerful incentive to move toward uniform behavior. As James Shuls of the Show-Me Institute wrote recently, “The fact is that curriculum standards don’t tell teachers how to teach in the same way that a high jump bar doesn’t tell a jumper how to jump. You could theoretically jump over a high jump bar in whatever way you would like; but because of how the jump is structured, there is a clear advantage to doing the old Fosbury Flop.”

Although standardized tests are not as imposing as curriculum standards, what’s on the test can drive what teachers teach, when, and how. Professor Jay P. Greene argued along similar lines regarding national standards: “Uniformity would only make sense if: 1) there was a single best way for all students to learn; 2) we knew what it was; 3) we could be sure the people running this nationalized education system would adopt that correct approach; and 4) they would remain in charge far into the future. But that isn’t how things are. There is no consensus on what all students need to know.”

Standardized tests create an incentive for uniformity when we should be fostering a diversity of pedagogical methods. To the extent that researchers, policymakers, and some educators believe standardized tests are useful, they should make their case in the free marketplace of ideas and encourage parents to choose the schools that administer them.

What they shouldn’t do is use the coercive power of government to fashion a top-down system of testing that could squelch diversity and innovation.

Milwaukee to Voucher Schools: No Sale

MADISON – In January 2011, Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett begged the Wisconsin state senate for legislation that would transfer control of vacant Milwaukee Public Schools real estate to the city of Milwaukee. State lawmakers passed a law allowing Milwaukee to sell unused school buildings without MPS approval.

Two years later, the city struggles to deliver. Milwaukee said it would quickly put the buildings to use, but it’s now refusing to sell to private voucher or for-profit charter schools until the state changes its education funding formula.

In March, the Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty (WILL), a Milwaukee-based nonprofit law firm, filed an open records request on Milwaukee’s stance.

“WILL discovered:

- The city refuses to directly sell empty schools without MPS’s approval, even though Act 17 says it can.
- City policy prohibits selling unused schools to private voucher and for-profit charter schools.

“It’s just rotten when you have children who are not able to go to high-performing schools … because of some vendetta [Milwaukee leaders] have with the legislature,” said C.J. Szafir, WILL’s education policy director.

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