Parents Camp Out, Risk Jail to Get Kids Into Better Schools

Every year, parents across the nation camp out and line up to get their kids into good schools. Some have even risked jail terms.

This year, Plano, Texas parents pitched tents in freezing temperatures to be among the first to list their kids to transfer out of their school district. Parents in Chandler, Arizona camped out for a full weekend to get their kids into a magnet school. Berkeley, California, like many other districts, hires home inspectors to make sure kids flagged as potential line-hoppers actually live in the district’s attendance zone.

By Loren Heal

Group Urges More Local Control

Ohioan Kelly Kohls is forming a national organization that will, she says, “coach school board members on how to achieve more local control and always accelerate student achievement.”

The National School Boards Leadership Council (NSBLC) already has coached board members in several states. Kohls says school board members need an alternative to the National School Board Association (NSBA) because it “is being used to push the adults-first agenda.”

As a school board member herself, several years ago Kohls decided to create the Ohio School Board Leader-
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Academics, Culture Lead Tennessee Mom to Private School

By Mary C. Tillotson

Marilyn Johnson couldn’t afford to put her son, Marshall, in a private school. She also said she couldn’t afford not to.

“I had researched the inner-city school system, and I knew they wouldn’t be a fit for my son,” Johnson said. “That’s when MOST came in.”

Johnson, who lives in Shelby County, Tennessee, found her opportunity through the Memphis Opportunity Scholarship Trust (MOST), funded by private philanthropists. Tennessee has considered replicating the program at the state level.

Try Again Another Day

The state Senate recently passed a bill offering 5,000 low-income students in the state’s lowest-performing schools scholarships allowing them to attend a private school of their choice. The bill stalled in the House, so Tennesseans will likely have to wait until next year to see whether lawmakers will pass the bill again.

“We feel like it’s a little bit small, but it’s a step towards helping more kids, and it’s hard to argue when you’re taking the poorest kids going to the poorest schools and helping them get a better education,” said Mandy Rough, MOST’s executive director.

Rough said she sees MOST as a way to help parents who truly want what’s best for their children. MOST scholarships are available to Shelby County students in low-income families. At approximately $2,000, the scholarships often don’t cover the total tuition, so families foot part of the bill. Many qualify, however, for need-based financial aid directly from their private schools. Families with outstanding tuition debt lose their eligibility.

This school year, 815 children in 673 families applied for MOST scholarships, but funding levels allowed only 515 children to receive them, Rough said.

“The families that come to MOST looking for scholarships are families that are absolutely concerned about education. They come to us saying, ‘I want to find the right school for my kid,’” she said.

Checking for Fit

MOST encourages families to check out their neighborhood public schools first—“Don’t assume that if your neighbor doesn’t like it, it won’t be good for your child,” Rough said—and helps them find options within the public system, such as open enrollment and charter schools.

For some families, a private school is the best fit, and MOST helps provide that opportunity. Parents who believe they’ve had a choice in their child’s education are typically more involved and committed, Rough said.

Johnson said the school’s mission dovetailed with her vision for her son.

Students aren’t allowed to cheat or steal, and they attend chapel services a few times a week. This summer, he’ll attend a leadership program at Harvard University.

Johnson said teachers and administrators are never too busy to keep her updated on Marshall’s progress.

“It’s just like we’re a family, and it’s always been like that, that personal touch. They say it takes a village to raise a child. It’s really true at St. George’s,” she said.

No Bullying Allowed

Putting Marshall in a college prep school reduced his chances of being bullied for the high academic expectations Johnson had for him, she said.

His public school peers meet him at their church, and they look up to him. A ninth-grader, Marshall is taking some of the same classes as 11th- and 12th-graders.

The school’s culture impressed Johnson. She hears Marshall and his friends talking positively about school, dressing respectfully, and enjoying “good, plain, clean fun.”

“You see a lot of bad things on TV. He’ll be 16 soon. At that age, a lot of young men have just given up hope, but he has hope for tomorrow. There’s a future for him,” she said. “I just cry because I am so grateful for St. George’s and MOST.”

MARILYN JOHNSON, PARENT
SHELBY COUNTY, TENNESSEE

“[My son] will be 16 soon. At that age, a lot of young men have just given up hope, but he has hope for tomorrow. There’s a future for him. I just cry because I am so grateful for St. George’s and MOST.”

—MARILYN JOHNSON, PARENT
SHELBY COUNTY, TENNESSEE
Parents Camp Out to Get Kids into Better Schools

Continued from page 1

In 2013–14, 308,650 students were enrolled in private choice programs across the country, according to the Alliance for School Choice. That’s approximately 0.6 percent of the nation’s K–12 students.

“There is a history in U.S. education of parents trying to get the best education for their children,” said Center for Education Reform President Kara Kerwin. “My parents worked around the clock to put me and my three older sisters through Catholic education in Buffalo, New York, when our traditional public schools were not doing well.”

Kerwin mentioned Kelley Williams Bolar, an Ohio mother who in 2011 faced jail time for falsifying her address to enroll her kids in a better school district.

Pent-Up Public Demand

Approximately 1 million kids are on charter school waitlists nationwide, according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

“The policy environment does not meet that demand,” Kerwin said.

“As it stands, only about 5 percent of all schoolchildren have access or are enrolled in schools of choice.”

Some programs labeled choice actually limit it, Kerwin said, such as “universal lotteries” for public schools. In these, districts ultimately decide where a child will attend, “and that goes against the premise that parents should be able to choose.”

One of the nation’s largest choice programs, Florida’s tax-credit scholarships for low-income children, stopped keeping tabs on how many more kids wanted the scholarships than got them, because it was disheartening. This year, some 114,000 kids have applied for approximately half that many spots.

“Almost all of the parents of scholarship children make a sacrifice to get their kids into the right school,” said Patrick Gibbons, spokesman for Step Up for Students, which runs the scholarships. “Since the scholarship is worth up to $4,880, most parents must pay a little out of pocket. … We hear stories from parents about turning down raises in order to remain eligible for the scholarship.”

Homeschoolers Threatened

When homeschooling became popular in the 1970s and ’80s, many parents were jailed or threatened with imprisonement for choosing that form of education.

“I became an attorney because my parents were jailed for homeschooling me,” Rick Brueggemann, a candidate for circuit judge, told the audience at a FreePAC Kentucky event April 5. “Mostly what I see is if parents can’t arrange to have their children in a really good parochial school, they’re homeschooling.”

Brueggemann says public education should give families freedom through school vouchers or education savings accounts.

Getting into Pre-K

“My wife went through some crazy antics to get our then-toddler into a pre-K daycare,” said Paul Croteau, a Texas dad. “We’re talking getting up at 4 a.m., waiting in line at 5 a.m., just to get a spot. … We’re not talking about getting a spot in school, but to get your name on the signup list.”

Croteau’s daughter is in eighth grade now, and he and his wife are trying to decide where she’ll attend high school.

“We actually started to social-network, finding parents who are in the schools already and then milking them for as much information as we can,” he said. “What did you do to get into that school? Who do I need to know to help move my application in? Who should I contact when? What activities are they looking for?”

For some private schools, getting in is like applying to college, he noted.

“They want to see grades. They want to see activities. They want to see your fundraising efforts in the past. They want to see not only what the student has done, but also what have you as the parent done for your school. … It’s very, very difficult these days,” he said.

Loren Heal (loren.heal@gmail.com) is a research programmer at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a reporter for The Heartland Institute.
S.C. Leaders Play Ping Pong with Common Core

By Joe Shaver
South Carolina’s state superintendent will pull the state from national Common Core tests, he said in a letter a week after the state board of education voted to keep them.

The week before that, the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) told school districts to stop Common Core pilot tests underway, because the state was pulling out.

Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Utah have all dropped the federally funded Common Core tests, which are intended to measure new national K–12 curriculum mandates in English and math.

‘An Important Victory for Parents’
In an April 3 memo, Deputy Superintendent Nancy Busbee announced the department was “taking steps to withdraw from the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium” (SBAC).

Citing proposals in the state legislature, Busbee explained dropping the federally funded Common Core testing organization would let the department secure new tests before this fall.

“Districts are therefore allowed to suspend the Smarter Balanced field testing currently underway in select South Carolina schools,” she wrote.

Those pilot tests were scheduled for the last few weeks of the current school year.

Withdrawing from SBAC is “an important victory for parents here when it comes to giving them a voice in what their children are going to be learning in their schools in South Carolina,” said Ellen Weaver, president of the Palmetto Policy Forum.

Conflicting Orders
Because of the conflicting decisions, school districts have flooded the board with phone calls seeking clarification, said state board Chairman Barry Bolen.

He argues the state should complete the pilot and look at the data from it before dropping the tests for another set. Bolen said he might be willing to support a different set of tests, but he called the SCDE’s decision “awful timing.”

“I’m not going to be railroaded into voting something out that we spent two years of time and money implementing, and in the middle of a pilot test,” said Bolen.

When asked about the pending legislation that would pull South Carolina out of SBAC for good, Bolen said, “If it does pass, then we’ll deal with it.”

A state senator is currently blocking a Common Core repeal bill sponsored by state Sen. Larry Grooms (R-Charleston). The House in April approved a different bill repealing Common Core and its tests.

“If we continue to focus only on Smarter Balanced, we lose any opportunity to consider alternatives,” state Superintendent Mickey Zais said in his letter.

Who’s On First
Despite the board’s vote, the SCDE remained firm in its decision school districts could drop the pilot test. Earlier this year, it took the first steps toward withdrawing from SBAC by letting school districts suspend the field tests, said Anna Burns, an SCDE spokeswoman.

With the end of the school year fast approaching, school districts are left with the difficult choice of determining whether to listen to the state superintendent, the department he leads, or the state board of education.

Joe Shaver writes from Bel Air, Maryland.

Involving Parents in Kids’ Education Helps Poor Preschoolers, Study Shows

By Bruce Edward Walker
Parental involvement is effective in improving lower-income preschoolers’ cognitive development, according to a study published in The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America.

The new report represents yet another study showing that helping parents help their kids is effective, whereas gold-standard studies find government preschool programs fail to achieve long-term improvements in children’s achievement.

The paper, “Family-based training program improves brain function, cognition, and behavior in lower socioeconomic status preschoolers,” was co-authored by seven psychologists from the University of Oregon and Willamette University. In their paper, the authors observe, “[T]he study provides a comprehensive picture of the changes resulting from a family-based training model, including not only gains for children in a direct neural measure of selective attention but also specific skills assessed by standardized tests, parent reports of child behavior, and parent behaviors and parenting stress levels.”

The authors state the study “underscore[s] the importance of engaging parents to support child development.”

They conclude, “[T]he study provides a model for replicating the findings of a small group of students.”

Bruce Edward Walker writes from Michigan.
Judge Lets Parents Fight for Vouchers in Louisiana

By Mary C. Tillotson

After Louisiana and the U.S. Justice Department both declared victory over a deal in a school voucher lawsuit brought by the Obama administration, a new window has opened: Louisiana parents will be allowed to have their day in court. The Fifth Circuit court overturned a lower court’s decision that prevented parents from intervening in the lawsuit that could have cost children their chance to attend the school of their parents’ choice.

“The Justice Department has attempted to block doors to the schoolhouse and courthouse,” said Clint Bolick, attorney for the Goldwater Institute, which has been working to intervene on the parents’ behalf, in a statement. “We are grateful that the Fifth Circuit has protected the rights of parents to act in the best interests of their children.”

‘A Great Day for School Choice’

In fall 2013, the DOJ filed a motion in a decades-old desegregation lawsuit, Brumfield v. Dodd, alleging Louisiana’s school voucher program increases racial segregation and was therefore violating court orders from the 1970s.

After legal back-and-forth, the U.S. District Court issued an order decreeing the state must provide racial and other information to the federal department, but the DOJ was given only 10 days to review it before the scholarships are awarded and doesn’t have automatic veto power over individual scholarships.

“Today is a great day for school choice and access to an opportunity for a better education for all Louisianians,” Gov. Bobby Jindal (R) said in a statement. “I am pleased that the court rejected President Obama’s Justice Department’s attempt to establish a review period where bureaucrats in Washington would be able to reject scholarship awards solely because the child is not the ‘right’ skin color.”

In the statement, Jindal said his administration will “remain vigilant” in case the DOJ attempts to use the information it receives to stymie the voucher program.

Excuse to Target Vouchers

Attorneys at the Goldwater Institute said the DOJ was wrong to intervene in the first place.

“We have argued throughout the course of this thing that the district court doesn’t have jurisdiction over the voucher program through the Brumfield case,” said Goldwater attorney Jon Riches. “Our position is that this doesn’t apply to the voucher program and never has. ... The Department of Justice never should have attempted to use a case that has no applicability to the voucher program to stop or get additional information about the voucher program.”

The court order from the Brumfield case stopped Louisiana from providing public assistance to private schools declared as racially segregated, Riches said. Louisiana’s voucher program doesn’t allow private schools to participate unless they are Brumfield-certified, or nondiscriminatory, according to the court orders.

Goldwater hasn’t yet decided on the next step, Riches said, but its attorneys intend to challenge the court’s jurisdiction.

“It’s tragic that they’re going after this program which has been so successful for Louisiana students and their families,” he said.

Mary Petrides Tillotson (mary.c.tillotson@gmail.com) is an education reporter for Watchdog.org.
School Districts Nationwide Dump Common Core

By Loren Heal

Several school districts across the country have decided to dump national Common Core curriculum and testing mandates, use better standards, and share them with other districts. One standards expert has volunteered to help them.

Sandra Stotsky is a professor at the University of Arkansas and a lead author on what many consider the best standards in the country—the former standards of Massachusetts, her home state. She says school boards are reacting to pressure from parents and teachers.

“They are hearing too many complaints from teachers as well as parents, so they know there are far more serious problems with this ‘reform’ than with other reform efforts,” she said.

Common Core is a list of what tests and curriculum must contain in every grade in math and English. Forty-five states replaced their standards with Common Core in 2010 under pressure from the Obama administration.

Floating New Ideas

In October 2013, Manchester, New Hampshire dropped Common Core.

“They decided to develop local standards because of the numerous parents who attended school board meetings demanding something better,” said Ann Marie Banfield, education liaison at New Hampshire-based Cornerstone Policy Research.

In Manchester, the Core will be used as a “floor,” Banfield said, but what that means is unclear. “We don’t know exactly, since the final Manchester Standards have not been fully developed.”

And in Tennessee they’re just shoving it down our throats, as far as I’m concerned.”

Rose is a retired teacher with 40 years’ experience.

“Teachers are getting torn and pulled in different directions,” said Rose. “What is the big hurry? We’re going to educate our children whether they do these standards or not.”

He said mandates like Common Core narrow the curriculum and are unrealistic given kids’ different needs and abilities.

“We should be introducing our children to everything we possibly can through the 12th grade, and then they can start specializing in college and when they get out of school,” Rose said. “I don’t think every kid needs to go to college. I’m sorry. They need to get education beyond 12 years, but it may be in a specialty like welding, or vocational courses” such as computer-aided design.

Kids Flock to Non-Common Core District

The Germantown, Wisconsin school board decided to reject Common Core and create its own standards. German-town is northwest of Milwaukee and enrolls many students from thelarger city because the state allows open enrollment between districts.

“Since we’ve done this in December, we’ve had over 225 applications for open enrollment, which is unheard of. That tells us we’re doing the right thing,” said board member Brian Medved.

“We had a top-performing district in the state,” Medved said, “and we felt we had the standard and we had the curriculum. Common Core was going to be a step backward for us.”

The district plans to put its standards and curriculum online for any district to use.

Districts Are Next Frontier

The next frontier for a nationwide movement to overturn Common Core is in local school districts, Stotsky said.

“Uninformed state Boards of Education voted in two sets of standards that are far from being internationally benchmarked, research-based, and rigorous,” Stotsky said. “They were promised internationally benchmarked standards from [Common Core] but didn’t get them. Their votes to adopt Common Core’s standards should be declared null and void because … the product didn’t meet the specifications they were promised.”

She recommends local boards reject Common Core standards and set up committees to draft better ones, let parents opt their children out of any Common Core tests, and tell teachers to abandon Common Core curricula.

“The government does not know better than the parents how to educate kids,” Rose said. “And they’re taking more and more decision-making away from locals and putting it down from the federal government. And there’s no way they know more what our children need than we do locally.”

Loren Heal (loren.heal@gmail.com) is a research programmer at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a reporter for The Heartland Institute.

Illinois House Renews Ban on Online Charter Schools

By Mary C. Tillotson

The Illinois House of Representatives has passed a three-year ban on virtual charter schools, shortly after an existing one-year ban expired.

“It’s an amazing story about what they want to do here in Illinois. We are going absolutely backward in terms of education reform and education innovation,” said Ted Dabrowski, vice president of policy at the Illinois Policy Institute.

Twenty-seven states have online schools, and five require students to take a class online before graduating high school, according to the International Association for K–12 Online Learning.

Much of the political pressure for the ban came from teachers unions, Dabrowski said.

“The school districts in Illinois have massive power. We have 868 school districts, the most in the nation, and they have massive power to keep out charter schools. They want to keep out competition, and so the unions and a couple of the legislators … have worked very hard to block reforms,” Dabrowski said. “There’s a lot of politics as usual.”

Mary Petrides Tillotson (mary.c.tillotson@gmail.com) is an education reporter for Watchdog.org. Reprinted with permission.

"[S]tate Boards of Education ... were promised internationally benchmarked standards from [Common Core] but didn’t get them. Their votes to adopt Common Core’s standards should be declared null and void ..."

SANDRA STOTSKY, PROFESSOR, UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS
Group to Help School Boards Increase Local Control

Continued from page 1

ship Council because the existing state association for school board members always pushed her to toe the party line instead of asking questions and making her own decisions, as voters elected her to do. Most state associations are part of NSBA and consequently share its approach.

A recent report found 95 percent of school board members receive some training, but it could not determine whether this improved their performance. It did find board members who were never educators are better informed about their district than current or former educators. School districts also perform better when board members are elected during regular November elections, it found.

Mind Meld
Existing state associations focus on “maintaining unity on school boards and singularity of thought,” said Wendy Hart, a school board member in the Alpine School District in Utah.

“The training Hart received as a new board member consisted of a “series of role plays in which board members were taught how to defer all media questions to the administration.”

She described one of the role-playing activities, in which one board member voted against a cell phone policy and came to you, the constituent who also disagreed with the policy. You were to be understanding, but supportive of the direction the board was going.”

‘Accelerate Local Control’
NSBLC training will not focus on maintaining unity on school boards as a priority but will instead emphasize “how to accelerate local control and not relinquish those controls to the state or local government,” Kohls said.

It also will focus on coaching school board members on how to avoid imposing new school taxes on residents.

“The role play was about how to handle a constituent who also disagreed with the policy and came to you, the board member, to complain,” Hart said.

“The instructions were not to agree with the constituent or even to tell the constituent you had voted against the policy. You were to be understanding, but supportive of the direction the board was going.”

Ousting Union Influence
Regarding school spending generally, Stanford University Professor Terry Moe explained, “a lot of the money gets poured into things that don’t go into raising student achievement, like paying for teachers’ master’s degrees.”

Because teachers unions typically dominate school board elections, their interests “become a priority of the board, and those things come into conflict with [the needs of] children,” he said.

Regarding formation of an alternative school board organization, Moe said, “a lot of the school board members are new to their jobs, and it’s good to inform them as to what reforms are possible and what ones aren’t.”

‘Top-Notch’ Seminars
In Ohio, Kohls holds six training events throughout the year, with an annual conference in October. When not training board members, Kohls attends conferences where she distributes literature hoping to recruit other groups to join her national organization.

Kohls’ “seminars have been top-notch with experts in the fields she’s presented,” said Sue Larimer, a school board member in Perrysburg, Ohio. The content covered in the events, she said, is “overwhelming most of the time, but always worth the time and effort.”

Kohls says her workshops and presentations empower board members instead of telling them what to do. She tries to make sure they understand that “a board policy cannot circumvent their rights and responsibilities.”

Civil Liberties Organization Sues to Overturn New Jersey Anti-bullying Law

By Mary C. Tillotson

If a Jewish student refers to the Holocaust and says the German Nazis were evil, and a German student overhears, should the Jewish student be punished for bullying?

Because of this and similar situations resulting from New Jersey’s anti-bullying law, the Rutherford Institute has filed a federal lawsuit trying to strike it down.

“It’s overbroad. It affects free speech. It should be written better,” said John Whitehead, president of the Rutherford Institute. “It uses a so-called ‘reasonable observer’—if a reasonable person thought this would be demeaning or harmful—but... this would apply to first-graders, second-graders. Are first, second, third, fourth, fifth graders reasonable people?”

Whitehead suggested teachers handle bullying situations discreetly and call parents to make sure they’re aware of how their children are behaving.

The current anti-bullying laws aren’t working as they ought to, he said.

“It chills free speech. Kids are going to be afraid to say anything factually,” he said.

Mary Petrides Tillotson (mary.c.tillotson@gmail.com) is an education reporter for Watchdog.org. Reprinted with permission.

Joe Shaver writes from Bel Air, Maryland.

Kelly Kohls discusses why she decided to create an alternate national school boards association: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5lz8ktolG4

Louisiana Lawmakers Consider Student Privacy Bill

By Ashley Bateman

A bill making its way through the Louisiana legislature would revamp how schools and the state collect student data.

Passed by the House and awaiting a vote in the Senate Education Committee, House Bill 1076 would forbid schools from collecting information such as students’ religious beliefs, political affiliation, incriminating behavior, and biometric information such as fingerprints. It also forbids schools from sharing individual student information with any entity unless that is required under state or federal law. It would allow districts to share aggregate, anonymous data and would allow parents or students of legal age to choose to share any information they want.

“The right to privacy is fundamental and protected under our Constitution,” said state Rep. John Schroder (R-St. Tammany Parish), the bill’s sponsor. “I shouldn’t even have to write this bill. ... Now we’re trying to catch up with technology. With the hit of a button, companies across the country, across the world for that matter, have access to private information.”

When parents began looking into the nation’s new math and English tests under Common Core, data privacy became a huge issue, said Lee Barrios, a founder of the Coalition for Louisiana Public Education.

“Parents want the authority to opt out,” Barrios said. “The claim that state or federal government entities require certain individual student data for funding specific programs such as IDEA for special-needs children or services for impoverished children presents a problem that could be solved by reporting processes that would require local school districts to verify the need for that funding without disaggregating data or providing student identifiers of any kind.”

Identity Theft, Marketing Concerns

In 2009, Louisiana received a federal grant, partly to develop a student data system that uses anonymous ID numbers. In testimony on the bill, state Superintendent John White said it would require spending even more money to protect student data.

“Unique student identifiers don’t solve the larger problem of the purpose of data-mining and sharing and its importance to the Common Core Initiative,” Barrios said. “The avowed purpose of student data is to link individual student needs with solutions and resources provided by private companies. A unique student identifier when coupled with sometimes as little as two or three other pieces of student data allows these companies to identify students and market their products accordingly.”

Higher-education institutions also have resisted the bill because they often use Social Security numbers to track students.

Social Security numbers “are linked to so many other very sensitive data-sets that [using them] can really increase the risk of identity theft,” said Khalia Barnes, a lawyer for the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC). “Using alternative numbers can be good as long as those numbers aren’t linked to all other types of student information.”

Student Data Security

EPIC recently proposed a student privacy bill of rights. More data protections are necessary because many federal and state student privacy laws do not apply to private companies, EPIC says, and the largest federal student privacy law, known as FERPA (the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act), was recently watered down through regulations.

“Schools can do a better job of engaging students and parents’ about student data privacy,” Barnes said.

“As adults we have the ability to approve someone using our information, but children rely on their parents,” Schroder said.

Parents’ Awareness Critical

The bill originally forbade schools and education agencies from releasing student information publicly, but it was revamped to allow schools to use student information in yearbooks, student IDs, and other common products.

“The intent of the bill is to keep personally identifiable data within the school districts so that they can function and continue necessary student services,” Schroder said.

Although new education technology offers many opportunities, parents and authorities should be aware of its dangers and protect kids from them, Barnes said.

“Schools should be accountable to enforcement authorities,” Barnes said. “Schools and private companies who can’t protect it shouldn’t collect it.”

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

PODCAST INFO


Learning is easier and faster when properly designed incentive systems are used. But teachers are trained not to use them—almost entirely for ideological reasons.

Rewards: How to use rewards to help children learn – and why teachers don’t use them well marshals the psychological and economic evidence to refute the arguments against incentives. This important new book explains how rewarding students, teachers, and schools for their progress can work—and makes a powerful case for more school choice.

Coming this year from The Heartland Institute. For pre-order information, visit heartlandstore.org
One of the nation’s most successful charter schools has decided to buck the trend and start private schools, instead of following the more prevalent conversion of private into charter.

Arizona’s BASIS.ed plans to open elite private schools, starting in California and New York.

“The mission of BASIS.ed is to raise the standards of U.S. education to the highest international levels,” said CEO Mark Reford. “When we can do that with charter schools, we will do it. When a private school is a better fit, we do that.”

Several of BASIS’s charter locations rank among the highest-achieving, not just in the United States but in the world. Students in its Tucson and Scottsdale campuses beat out every other country that participated in international tests in 2012. Each BASIS student takes an average of 10 Advanced Placement exams and nets a score high enough to get college credit without taking a college class.

BASIS may be the first charter school chain to open private schools, said Jason Bedrick, a policy analyst at the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom.

“They offer an incredibly high-quality product,” Bedrick said, “and I expect that [to succeed] especially somewhere like Silicon Valley, with a lot of people who are highly educated who appreciate what a good education means, especially one like BASIS offers, and are willing to pay for it.”

High-End Niche

Although many, if not most, charter schools target gaps at the low end of the market—poor kids who can barely read and write—BASIS aims at a gap on the high end: The nation’s mediocre K–12 performance in comparison with international peers. Even the best U.S. schools hardly meet the average performance of schools in countries such as South Korea, Finland, and Germany.

BASIS’s challenging curriculum—students may start algebra as early as fifth grade—fits poorly with students who are far behind, but it can be an excellent fit for those who need a challenge. As charter schools they must accept every student, but their students tend to self-select: Nearly 10 percent of students at BASIS’s DC campus left the school in its first year, and one of its Arizona campuses lost almost 25 percent its first year. DC head of school Paul Morrissey told the local charter board. The DC campus is the only BASIS school with a large proportion of minority and poor students.

“Selectivity isn’t the issue; the issue is one of expectations,” Reford said. “At BASIS.ed, we believe that students rise to the expectations you set for them. We believe young minds are ready for the challenges of material not usually taught in typical grade school settings, public or private.”

Why Private?

BASIS charters need approximately $6,500 per student to break even, but their private tuition will run $22,000 in San Jose and $23,000 in Brooklyn.

“The traditional private school is built on a paradigm and curriculum that we believe is rooted in obsolete thinking,” said Reford. “As one example: We won’t do fundraising.”

Although tuition at the BASIS Independent schools will run about three times higher than at the organization’s charters, spokesman Phil Handler says they significantly undercut prices at the elite private schools against which they hope to compete. High-end K–12 tuition in many places runs to $40,000 or more.

“The BASIS curriculum is the same, but it costs more to implement that academic program in high-cost metro areas than it does in Arizona—teacher salaries are more, building maintenance is more, everything is more [expensive],” Handler said.

The private schools will have larger, more elaborate buildings and more amenities than the company’s charter schools, such as “sports facilities, a theater with an orchestra pit, stadium seating, practice rooms,” he said.

“BASIS.ed has a simple belief that as many kids as possible should be able to get an excellent education, with uncompromising standards at an international level,” Reford said. “Put simply, the private school market allows more kids to attend a BASIS.ed school.”

Teachers at the Top

BASIS teachers’ evaluations, earning them bonuses for high performance. They are granted a large degree of freedom to teach how they like, as long as their students perform extremely well.

“The word ‘professionalize’ says that the teacher has subject and content mastery, and is a master of the craft of teaching, and that they need to have the liberty to teach in their classroom what it is that they want, and they know that the students need, to learn,” said Phil Kilgore, director of the Barney Charter School Initiative at Hillsdale College. “What that does is let the teacher not necessarily be a slave to some program or pedagogy or some set of standards.”

A passion for subject matter is crucial for BASIS teachers, Reford said.

“BASIS was founded by two economists who expect a lot out of their students and value human capital,” Bedrick said. “They are willing to seek out the best and demand the best from the top people who are well-acquainted with subject matter in the field that they’re teaching, not only that they have a degree in teaching.”

Loren Heal is a research programmer at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a reporter for The Heartland Institute.
Mississippi Special-Needs Choice Bill to Return

By Mary C. Tillotson

In Mississippi, only 23 percent of special-needs students graduate high school.

That’s why state Rep. Carolyn Crawford (R-Pass Christian) introduced a bill this year allowing parents to enroll children in a private school, hire tutors and therapists, and otherwise tailor students’ education to their individual needs using their state funds.

The bill failed.

The special-needs graduation rate “is unacceptable to me as a parent, and one would hope that it was unacceptable to the state of Mississippi,” Crawford said. “It wasn’t as important to the other legislators as I thought.”

‘Call It a Travesty Bill’

Katie McCustion, a Tupelo, Mississippi mother of a boy with dyslexia, fought with her school district over her son’s education.

“As a parent, I don’t care if they call it a coupon program,” she said. “I don’t know why they’re stuck on the word ‘voucher.’ Whatever you want to call it—you can call it a travesty bill if you want to.”

McCustion said she would want her son, Ian, to attend school in the Tupelo Public School District if it could serve him. She wants to enroll him in a private school that serves dyslexic students but would transfer him back if the public school improves.

“They told me that, as a district, ... because of budget, we can’t meet his needs so he can be on par [with other students],” she said. “I love this school. I’m not anti-district, but if I can’t meet the needs of my child, I need more options.”

Two weeks after Ian began kindergarten, his teacher could tell something was wrong. It turned out to be dyslexia, which afflicts roughly 20 percent of the public.

Struggling with School Administrators

Getting Ian diagnosed was a struggle, McCustion said. The school’s dyslexia coordinator resisted testing him several times, and when she finally did, she told McCustion that Ian’s age—then 5—could skew the test results.

Five-year-olds can be screened for dyslexia, McCustion learned later.

“I feel like I’ve done the research of someone who has a four-year degree,” she said. “They say the mom does better research than the FBI; that probably goes for education, too.”

Ian finally received an Individualized Education Plan, which outlined the accommodations the school would provide, but they were not implemented, his mother said.

As part of the IEP, Ian was supposed to take tests privately, in a separate room, because the presence of other students distracted him. One Friday afternoon, his mother came to take him to a therapy appointment and found him taking a math test in a corner of the classroom with the teacher, while the other students laughed and talked with a guest speaker.

This scenario is typical, McCustion said, and it has taken an emotional toll.

“In January of this year, he had a breakdown over reading a book, and he told me he was the slowest reader in his class,” McCustion said. “My son gets migraines because of this. He has stomach aches. He was throwing up last year. A kindergartner throwing up out of anxiety for going to school is wrong.”

Parents Rally

McCustion and dozens of other parents rallied in Jackson, sharing their stories with lawmakers and calling on the legislature to pass the school choice bill.

The program was modeled on Arizona’s education savings accounts. Mississippi’s program initially would have been open to 500 families and allot $6,000 each—much less than it costs public schools to educate them.

Opponents argued the state should increase funding for special-education services in public schools.

“We are very concerned about the potential to cause great harm to the children with special needs and take advantage of them with these bills,” said Nancy Loome, executive director of the Parents Campaign, a public-school advocacy group.

Failure to Enact

The bill failed in a second House vote.

“There was a consensus that something needed to be done, and this was the only bill that would have addressed that problem this year,” said Grant McCausland, senior policy analyst for Advocacy Mississippi, a policy organization promoting education choice.

Some representatives who ultimately voted against the bill probably hoped it would be revised into something they could support, Callen said. He said he was not aware of other legislative initiatives to help kids with special needs.

“The groups that opposed this oppose any measure that would give parents options, and their solution to any educational problem is just more money,” he said. “Money has not solved our educational problems in decades.”

McCustion said she was eventually told Ian couldn’t be served, because of a lack of money.

Better Luck Next Time

Crawford said she is “absolutely” planning to push the bill again next year.

“I’m going to sponsor this bill until I get it passed,” she said. “We have some districts that follow state and federal guidelines and some great teachers in some districts, but we have some districts where they’re not able to do that, and it’s very difficult for our parents to get the services they need.”

“He’s going to be in this city, a citizen of this state, that’s what it’s about,” McCustion said of her son. “Is he a citizen that’s going to bring economy here? What if he was the next Steve Jobs?”

The Tupelo Public School District did not return calls for comment.

Mary Petrides Tillotson (mary.c. tillotson@gmail.com) is an education reporter for Watchdog.org. Reprinted with permission.

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CAROLYN CRAWFORD
STATE REPRESENTATIVE
PASS CHRISTIAN, MISSISSIPPI
Colorado Teachers Flock to Gun Classes

By Loren Heal

At a free class this spring, more than 200 Colorado teachers became certified to carry a concealed weapon, but lawmakers turned down legislation to let them carry a firearm in school.

Rocky Mountain Gun Owners (RMGO) held its annual free class for teachers on February 28. In 2013, 300 teachers took the class. “They came here for training tonight because they want the next Adam Lanza to face the barrel of a .45,” RMGO Executive Director Dudley Brown said then, referring to a teen who shot 20 schoolchildren and six school staff in 2012.

“As with all so-called ‘gun-free zones,’ they are actually just criminal-safe zones,” said Joe Neville, RMGO’s political director. “And that’s what public schools are. They become prime targets for criminals to come in and slaughter the most innocent among all of us, our children, and the teachers that are with them.”

In 2013 at least 80 bills in 33 states related to arming teachers and school staff, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Seven had become law by November. Now more than a dozen states allow trained staff to carry weapons inside K–12 schools.

Legislation Under Fire

“This is a great step forward in the mindset of teachers, who tend to be women,” said Jennifer Pinnell, former vice president of development for The Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News. She witnessed the class and is considering teaching similar classes in the future.

Colorado House Bill 1157, sponsored by state Rep. Steve Humphrey (R-Sedalia) and the Senate president. That’s a mistake, Neville and Pinnell both say.

“In 2013, the Colorado legislature passed three major gun restrictions. Lawmakers then rejected attempts to repeal those laws, so voters recalled and ousted three state senators who supported gun restrictions, including the Senate president.

Teachers Learn Defense

In the class, teachers “come to learn what [concealed carry] means, what they need to do to get a concealed carry permit,” Neville said. “Right now the law doesn’t allow teachers to concealed carry into the classroom.”

“That’s a mistake, Neville and Pinnell both say. Neville said armed attackers would be less likely to attack a school if they knew teachers could be armed for defense.

Nearly every mass shooting over the past 30 years has taken place in a gun-free zone, Pinnell noted. The teachers she saw at the class were seeking the means to protect themselves and their charges.

“We trust teachers with our children, to teach them, to help shape them, to have an impact on them for the rest of their lives,” but not to protect them, said Neville.

Loren Heal (loren.heal@gmail.com) is a research programmer at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a reporter for The Heartland Institute.

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Mississippi Spending More on Education, but Student Achievement Stays Poor

By Steve Wilson

Despite massive increases in public education funding, student performance has either remained constant or declined nationwide. Mississippi is no different.

A study by Andrew J. Coulson, director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, analyzed data collected since 1972 on per-pupil spending and student performance using state SAT score averages adjusted for participation rates and student demographics.

Mississippi education spending has risen since 1972, but student performance, as measured by the SAT averages, has remained the same or declined.

The Mississippi legislature increased K–12 education funding by 3.8 percent for fiscal year 2015, from $2.34 billion in 2014 to $2.43 billion. That figure represents 40.5 percent of the state’s $6 billion annual budget.

Hiring Spree

“If we really care about children’s education, it’s not enough to just spend more on it year after year,” Coulson said. “We have to make sure that we make the best possible use of our limited resources, or we shortchange students.”

Coulson said school districts awash in ever-increasing funding have been on a hiring spree nationally. Since 1972, public schools have hired twice as many people to educate only 9 percent more students. Employment has grown 11 times faster than enrollment.

“Sadly, our school systems have squandered the talents of so many of their employees that adding 3 million people [nationally] to the rolls has done nothing for students’ verbal or mathematical achievement,” Coulson said.

Further Bloat Ahead

K–12 funding will gobble up an even bigger chunk of Mississippi’s budget if the state’s voters approve a proposed ballot initiative on education funding.

The Mississippi Adequate Education Program, a state law, says $2.43 billion isn’t enough. The law was passed in 1997 by a Democrat-majority legislature over the veto of Republican Gov. Kirk Fordice. Only twice, in 2003 and 2007, has the legislature met the full requirements of the MAEP formula. Lawmakers are not constitutionally obligated to completely satisfy those requirements.

The activist organization Better Schools = Better Jobs is trying to collect 107,000 signatures before October 1 to place an initiative on the state ballot in 2015 that would make fully funding MAEP a constitutional requirement.

Steve Wilson (swilson@watchdog.org) is a reporter for Watchdog.org. Reprinted with permission.

School Choice Caucus Established in Congress

By Anna Giaritelli

The Congressional School Choice Caucus is the first group of its kind on Capitol Hill. Parents and lawmakers joined forces March 25 for the inaugural meeting, broadly discussing ways to continue expanding educational freedom so all children can receive a good education, regardless of the ZIP code in which they live.

U.S. Rep. Luke Messer (R-IN) founded the caucus during National School Choice Week in late January, saying school choice is the civil rights issue of this generation. His goal—to explain how market-based principles can improve education—could help policymakers understand how school choice is “something that changes lives” and can be a catalyst to affect future relevant legislation.

“I’m pleased Rep. Messer is launching the School Choice Caucus to draw greater attention to the value and importance of school choice,” House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH), author of the first school choice language ever to be adopted into law, said in a statement.

Raising the Profile

At present, 23 states and the District of Columbia offer private school choice programs. Messer, former head of School Choice Indiana, is now working to bring that state-level phenomenon to the federal level. Overhauling the federal system is difficult because the vast majority of funding comes from state and local taxes, but the caucus can raise awareness on the issue and send a message to lawmakers, said Lindsey Burke, the Will Skillman education fellow at The Heritage Foundation.

“The caucus will be able to think through ways the federal government can appropriately help to advance school choice, such as by allowing states the opportunity to make federal education dollars portable, following students to a private school of choice, or working to strengthen and grow the highly successful D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program,” she said.

Washington, DC resident Andrienne Lynch is the mother of three children who participate in the DC voucher program. She attended the caucus’s first meeting to share her positive experiences, affirming the voucher program’s ability to help children learn more, whether through open enrollment, expanding charter schools, or increasing access to online classrooms.

“There’s no question in my mind this program works’ and “has changed our lives and our family,” she said at the meeting. “I just can’t see not having this program for those that are coming behind me.”

Todd Rokita (R-IN), chairman of the House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education, also noted “a lot of bipartisan energy” around the issue.

“In America, a good education is the great equalizer, something that gives our children the chance to fulfill their potential no matter how they fared in the lottery of life. That’s why the more we can do to empower parents to pick and choose the schools that best meet their kids’ needs, the better,” Boehner said.

Anna Giaritelli resides in Washington, DC and specializes in congressional reporting. She has written for Roll Call, The Oregonian, the Washington Examiner, and The Daily Caller.

“In America, a good education is the great equalizer, something that gives our children the chance to fulfill their potential no matter how they fared in the lottery of life.”

JOHN BOEHNER

U.S. REPRESENTATIVE - OHIO
‘Back to Basics’ School in Virginia Draws Students

By Ashley Bateman

In 2013, 298 Virginia families applied for the 72 slots at Arlington Traditional School, a “back to basics” school that has been oversubscribed for years while district leaders have failed to expand or replicate it.

Traditional schools have popped up across the country, often prompted by parents weary of education experiments that leave their kids with little knowledge. They typically emphasize academics and decorum. Parents start ed Arlington Traditional (ATS) in 1978. It has been oversubscribed for decades. The Arlington County school district has opened Spanish-immersion and Montessori schools, but no additional back-to-basics schools.

“Administrators and principals don’t have much direct incentive to expand successful programs, so often they don’t,” said David Boaz, vice president of the Cato Institute and an Arlington resident. “And the absence of outside competition from charter schools or private choice schools makes it even easier to ignore parental demand for alternatives.”

The ABCs

Following the ABC (Academics, Behavior, and Character) approach to instruction, ATS has earned National Blue Ribbon awards for academic excellence.

“It’s pretty tried and true,” said Principal Holly Hawthorne. “We try to keep things simple.”

Every child must learn self-discipline, and the school follows the six pillars of character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship, Hawthorne said.

“It’s a successful school through design,” said Parent Teacher Association President Neil Pratt. “High expectations feed success.”

Education Steeped in Progressivism

Schools of education and universities have almost wholly adopted progressive approaches, making it the mainstream mode of education, said Louis Chandler, an educational psychology professor at the University of Pittsburgh.

“Education, like any other part of society, is susceptible to fads and current social thinking,” Chandler said. “At some point progressivism began to have a stronger hold on education.”

Most schools of education tell teachers that using traditional methods or emphasizing the basics in instruction will harm students, he said. In his study of private, public, charter, religious, and alternative schools, Chandler found very few schools actually practice traditional instruction, because almost all teachers attend education schools. This means parents often think an institution with “traditional” in its name is living up to that name, but many are not.

“We need to really make a clear distinction between traditional, conservative, or back-to-basics, which rely on things like direct instruction,” Chandler said. Direct instruction is when a teacher explicitly tells students how to solve problems, rather than the progressive approach that tells teachers to let students discover answers and meaning on their own.

United Around a Mission

ATS leaders make their distinct mission very clear during teacher interviews, Hawthorne said.

“They have to buy into [the ABCs] 100 percent right from the very beginning,” Hawthorne said.

Teachers at ATS tend to stay. Hawthorne is only the second principal in the school’s history, and the kindergarten team has been together since the school’s inception.

“We have a great team of teachers who really stick to the core values at each level,” Pratt said. “In education at times you see different approaches. We are unashamedly faithful to the model that we have.”

Parent Involvement

Like many magnet schools, ATS holds a lottery for admissions. Parents who choose to put their child’s name into the lottery are required to tour their neighborhood school.

Pratt has two children, a first- and a fourth-grader, in the school. He said requiring parents to actively choose their child’s school through the lottery does “change the mindset of parents.”

“Particularly in Arlington, there are a lot of very busy parents; … nonetheless, they understand the value of parents supporting their school community.”

ATS sends home weekly written summaries of student progress.

“Parents are their [child’s] first teacher, and parents know their children best,” Hawthorne said. “If the triangle [of parent, student, teacher] is in harmony, the child is more successful.”

Northern Virginia schools are among the highest-performing in the nation. That often makes parents, voters, and lawmakers complacent, Booz said.

“School choice is not just a good idea in districts with failing schools—it’s a way to get more alternatives and better education even in high-performing districts,” he said. “But parents who are satisfied with their schools don’t tend to push for choice.”

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

Fathers Affect Kids’ College Success, Report Says

High school students whose fathers are involved in their lives are far more likely to earn a college degree than those whose fathers are not, explains a new policy brief.

Because dads’ involvement with their kids is lower in poor families and in broken families, the kids who need a dad’s assistance don’t have him, says report author W. Bradford Wilcox.

“Compared to teens who reported that their fathers were not involved, teens with involved fathers were 98 percent more likely to graduate from college, and teens with very involved fathers were 105 percent more likely to graduate from college,” the report says. Wilcox calculated those numbers using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health and controlling for socioeconomic background.

The survey asks teens if fathers do things with them such as help with homework, talk about personal problems, or play a sport. Wilcox found intact families were those most likely to have involved fathers, and the most involved fathers are married to mothers with a college education.

— Staff Reports

LEARN MORE

You don’t have to invite 15-year-old Donnica Coleman to share her thoughts about school choice. She bubbles over about how her destiny has changed like the flip of a switch since she left her public middle school and entered Wisconsin’s voucher program.

“I wasn’t even an OK student,” she says unabashedly. “I was skipping class and had something like 100 truancies. I was an ‘F’ and ‘D’ student. I was always fighting.”

Lorice Wren, Donnica’s mother, nods in agreement.

“I never got called,” the 34-year-old says. “At the time, I was working a night shift and I was home during the day. No one ever called. I was furious by the end of the year.

“I was trying to teach one thing at home and another was happening at school,” says Lorice.

Stopping the Fighting

That was more than two years ago, when Donnica was attending a public middle school in Racine. Her little sister’s fervent desire to attend a private school changed their lives. Timia is four years younger than her big sister and was having her own problems in school.

“I got into a lot of fights, and my grandma and mom had to come get me,” Timia said. “My mom raised my sister and me to stand up for ourselves, and so if anyone bullied me, I would stand up and fight.”

Her mom says fighting was a frequent occurrence at the schools. “As a parent, we would be waiting to pick up our children and learn that whole classrooms were held late because of the number of fights happening in the school.”

Begged for Choice School

Timia begged her mother to send her to a private school after seeing a story about vouchers on the news. Now Timia is a sixth-grader at Concordia Lutheran School in Sturtevant, and her sister is a freshman at Racine Lutheran High School. They both are in their second year of the Parental Private School Choice Program in Racine.

“At Concordia, everything changed,” says Timia. “I understand things more clearly. The teachers deal with someone’s behavior. I got accepted. And I met my best friend, Amy. I love this school.”

Lorice agrees. Timia has more friends and better grades. She is on the honor roll.

Peer pressure is a real game-changer, nods Donnica.

“Before, I was with kids that didn’t want to learn,” she says of her old cluster of friends at McKinley. “But when I got to private school, all of the students wanted to learn. They encouraged me to do my work. The teachers are on you—you’re going to do this!”

Hope for the Future

Not all the changes are academic.

“I used to sneak around with boys,” Donnica admits. “When I got to Concordia, my relationship with my mom got better. Now I tell her everything.”

Donnica began shifting her attitude during a summer program at a college, she says. The rest of the transformation came with a career day at Racine Lutheran High School, when she talked with an Air Force recruiter.

Seeing what college could be like, talking with a recruiter, and beginning to fathom a future fueled by higher education motivated Donnica. She is singularly focused now and made the honor roll.

Having a safe environment for her children allowed Lorice to grow as well. She had been working full-time and studying for a master’s degree part-time. Because she felt she needed to pay more attention to her girls, she didn’t expect to finish school until 2015. But once the girls entered their new schools, Lorice says she could attend to her own education. She graduated from Concordia University and now is a substance abuse therapist in Milwaukee.

“I’m doing what I love, and it’s all because I was able to put my children in a safe and nurturing environment so that they, too, could learn to do what they would love.”

Lorice Wren, Mother, Racine, Wisconsin
Lifting Recess Rules Reduces Bullying, Study Finds

By Ashley Bateman

By reducing recess rules and expanding students’ playtime, Swanson School in Auckland, New Zealand has seen less bullying and more classroom concentration.

The school joined an Auckland University study originally meant to see whether better playground equipment reduced obesity and bullying by causing an increase in physical exertion. The study changed course dramatically after revamping the equipment proved too expensive, said Grant Schofield, a study coauthor and professor at the university.

“Walk around a modern schoolyard, and there is quite a lot of supervision from teachers,” Schofield said in an interview. “Swanson had about six teachers on duty for lunchtime, and most of their interaction with the kids was very negative.”

Over-Regulated Playground

“When we started looking at our playground, it struck me that it was very regulated,” said Principal Bruce McLachlan. “There were a number of rules which had been established by teachers over a long period of time, most of which were based on the need to take care of the children and not let them get hurt.”

Without announcing anything to the children or their parents, supervisors began removing rules, one at a time. Basically, unless an action hurt someone or damaged their property, it became fair game.

“The change was evolutionary rather than revolutionary,” McLachlan said. “We essentially stopped saying no.”

After several weeks, classroom achievement went up, and bullying ceased almost entirely, Schofield said. Kids spent their time skateboarding, climbing trees, playing with dirt, and investigating the “loose parts pit,” which includes discarded wood, tires, and an old fire hose. The school jetisoned its timeout corner and reduced the number of teachers who had to mediate, they are going to miss out on valuable play time. … Better to compromise and carry on.”

BRUCE MCLACHLAN, PRINCIPAL
SWANSON SCHOOL
AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND

Fear of Lawsuits

McLachlan says one reason this system works well in New Zealand is freedom from national regulations on schools and protection from lawsuits.

New Zealand’s government insurance program pays for the medical costs of injuries, which means fewer lawsuits, McLachlan said. For a similar approach to work in U.S. schools, they would probably have to get all parents to sign a waiver, said Michael Gurian, founder of the Gurian Institute.

“The instinct of professionals is to let kids work it out, but they don’t want litigation,” Gurian said. “We would need a change in the relationship between our system and our school system.”

Teaching Self-Discipline

In areas with much violence, such as inner cities, reducing rules may not be wise, he said, but overall the institute’s data indicate giving kids more freedom and playtime has myriad positive results.

“We create a lot of discipline problems by over-coding our kids’ behavior,” Gurian said. “By [adults] stepping in, these kids can’t develop self-mastery and self-discipline.”

The prevalence of lawsuits shows many U.S. parents are looking only at inner cities, reducing rules may not be wise, he said, but overall the institute’s data indicate giving kids more freedom and playtime has myriad positive results.

“The instinct of professionals is to let kids work it out, but they don’t want litigation,” Gurian said. “We would need a change in the relationship between our system and our school system.”

Gurian said. “By [adults] stepping in, these kids can’t develop self-mastery and self-discipline.”

The prevalence of lawsuits shows many U.S. parents are looking only at the risks of certain activities, not the potential benefits, he said.

“If too many controls are placed on play, there is less learning,” McLachlan said. “It is better for a boy to test himself at [age] eight, up a tree or on a scooter, than behind the wheel of a car at 18.”

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

Rotten Core

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.
Vouchers a ‘Gift from God’ for Wisconsin Family

By Lisa Fix

When Daniel Bradley found out his five school-aged children would be eligible for a new statewide school choice program last year, he had no idea how much of an impact it would have on his family.

The Wisconsin Parental Choice Program was created by Gov. Scott Walker in time for the 2013–14 school year. Bradley says it “has been a blessing. It’s a gift from God.”

For 13 years, Bradley has worked for the Frito-Lay company in Beloit as a forklift operator. His wife is in school studying to be an accountant. They said they couldn’t afford private-school tuition.

But when news began circulating that the school choice program, currently limited to Milwaukee and Racine, might expand statewide, Bradley’s wife began to read up about what the governor was proposing as a statewide voucher program. Bradley says the couple had all their facts and figures prepared before the expansion even passed the legislature.

When the program became official and the Bradleys had 48 hours to get everything in to apply, they were ready. Soon, all five of the Bradleys’ school-aged children (they have one daughter who just graduated high school and one infant) were attending Rock Country Christian School.

“It’s such a difference,” says Bradley. “Before, none of them were doing well. They were behind and always in trouble. None of them had plans for college.” Now the family has begun setting money aside for college, because they see it as a possibility for their children.

One-on-One Attention

Much of the transformation in the Bradley children has resulted from the compassionate, attentive, and disciplined atmosphere at Rock Country Christian School. “When my kids get home, they sit down for two hours; they don’t fight, and they work together,” Bradley said. “I have a kid working on a four-month project right now, and he is way ahead on it.”

Bradley’s son, eighth-grader Nathaniel, credits his teachers for helping him become a better student.

“The teachers are a lot more one-on-one,” he said. “You can go to them for help, and they’ll be there because there’s less kids.”

Janet Befus, the school’s administrative assistant, also noticed the positive change throughout the year in the Bradley children. “They are engaged, they enjoy the service projects, they are continuously improving, and you can see the pride they feel when their accomplishments are recognized,” she said.

Bradley says his son was in a class of 30 in public school, but now he’s in a class of eight, which helps teachers give students more personalized attention.

“I used to have to e-mail teachers every day trying to get help—I even went through the boards and couldn’t get answers for weeks,” said Bradley. “Now I e-mail [my son’s] teacher, and I get an answer within an hour. And if, for example, he’s not doing well in math, we have tutors, we have teachers, and even the principal focuses on what they can do better.”

Improving Family Life, Academics

Bradley says each of his five children in the program has “jumped up” academically since entering. “They’re all A-B students,” he says. His fifth-grader is now doing what his ninth-grader was doing the year before.

But Bradley emphasizes his enthusiasm for the program is not just about the schooling—it has improved their family life, as well. Much of that has to do with all the kids attending the same school and having similar shared experiences. Bradley said he loves that his kids can sit with each other and get to know each others’ friends. Also, smaller class sizes mean they get to know their classmates better, and the entire family now goes to church together, binding them further.

As the children entered private school, the Bradley family had some unique problems. Several of their kids had special needs, several had speech problems, and some had been diagnosed with ADHD. But their new school focuses on the individual needs of each child.

“They don’t give up,” said Bradley. “Anyone who doesn’t see the benefits has got to be blind.”

Opportunity for Low-income Families

Bradley urged other low-income families, and even the principal focuses on what they can do better.

Bradley said he also likes that his kids wear uniforms to school, so they are not singled out as having less money than other kids’ families.

“You don’t have to worry about the $80 jeans. Kids are judged on who they are, not how they dress or their parents’ income,” he said.

“To see the transformation in their child is what every parent wants,” said Bradley. “You can see your child growing, and wanting to learn, and accepting what there is for the future. It really makes me, as a father, proud.”

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Georgia Lawmaker Can’t Answer Her Own Question about Common Core

By Mary Grabar

What do educators and legislators mean when they praise Common Core, the national education standards for math and English Language Arts?

In Georgia, it turns out those educators and legislators know almost nothing about the standards. Yet in a coordinated effort they defeated state Sen. William Ligon’s (R-Brunswick) bill to withdraw the state from Common Core. Using school buses, many educators traveled nearly 200 miles on a workday to testify against it.

Using taxpayer-provided email accounts, superintendents encouraged principals and principals encouraged teachers to testify against Ligon’s bill. A memo by Tift County School Superintendent Patrick Atwater went out to principals on February 28. On March 4, the day before the hearing, Charles Elementary School Principal Mickey Weldon wrote in an email, “Teachers, please give personal accounts of the hours of professional development, assessment design, reading, and coaching you have had to endure to be ‘experts’ in common core [sic].”

But these experts only repeated hollow catchphrases in their testimony. At the March 5 hearing, one teacher from Lee County said, “I’ve now tasted rigor.” A retired professor praised Common Core’s “critical thinking component.” One Decatur teacher said Common Core allows students to know the “how’s and why’s.”

The media, including the local CBS affiliate, then repeated that Common Core sets “clear standards” and goals for graduation from high school.

Buzzwords instead of Knowledge

As Martin Cothran, editor of The Classical Teacher, explains in his article “The Critical Thinking Skills Hoax,” critical thinking at one time “meant something,” like logic, “but today it has been hijacked by proponents of what is called ‘twenty-first century learning.’” Critical thinking is lumped in with such terms as “creativity,” “collaboration,” and “deep learning”—all of which are the opposite of true disciplinary learning. They are key ideas of progressive education, which the late Harvard education professor Jeanne Chall showed impedes academic achievement.

A look at the standards themselves reveals a dumbing down. Common Core English Language Arts standards focus on short passages and alternative media, such as videos; on short, informal writing assignments; and on “speaking and listening skills”—even for high school juniors and seniors.

But the simple repetition of phrases was good enough for the politicians and media to conclude the weight of professional opinion favored Common Core. A higher standard of evidence was applied to Ligon, sponsor of the withdrawal bill.

Gotcha Moment

At the two hearings, state Rep. Amy Carter (R-Valdosta), who proudly told me she was the “only active public school teacher” serving in the Georgia Assembly, challenged him.

On March 5, she asked Ligon, “Can you tell me three standards that you find objectionable?” Ligon, of course, could not recite chapter and verse of the document that is hundreds of pages long.

When Carter asked him again at the March 12 hearing, he told her critiques were included in a packet given to the committee members. These included critiques by Sandra Stotsky (a member of the validation committee who refused to sign off on the English Language Arts standards) and Ze’ev Wurman (in math).

Filling the Echo Chamber

Carter’s gotcha moment, though, was gleefully reported in the media. The local alternative weekly, Creative Loafing, in its yearly “Golden Sleaze Awards,” awarded Ligon the “Better Off Uneducated” award.

On multiple occasions, Atlanta Journal-Constitution education blogger Maureen Downey referred to Ligon’s inability to answer Carter’s question.

In two emails I asked Downey to name three standards she liked. I followed up with two phone calls. Downey did not respond.

Can’t Answer Own Question

Downey believes we should trust the word of the teaching “professionals.” I called Carter, the state representative who is also a teacher. She told me she asked Ligon that question because of the “misinformation” about Common Core evidenced by the many emails she has received. One of the misconceptions was that cursive writing is eliminated. Not true, she said, pointing me to the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards for grade 3, page 5-5, section J, “writes legibly in cursive.”

Carter explained Common Core was already closely aligned (by 85 percent) with the Georgia Performance Standards when the state adopted Common Core.

She said, “I believe the Common Core Performance Standards are more rigorous.” Carter also claimed the public is confused about “standards” and “curriculum.” She notes standards are the expectations of what students should be able to do.

She confirmed for me my understanding that the “Speaking and Listening Standards” that evaluate students’ ability to engage in “civil and democratic discussions” on grade level topics are “standards.” The curriculum would be the reading and other materials for the topics to be discussed. (Technically, although Common Core replaces much of the literary reading with “informational text,” it provides only suggestions for reading materials.)

After I described this example, I again asked her if she could cite parts of the Common Core standards that were superior to the previous Georgia Performance Standards. She replied, “not specifically, no.” She said she hadn’t looked at the Georgia Performance Standards in a number of years.”
Conference Mission:

The International Conference on School Choice and Reform (ICSCR) brings together researchers, policy specialists, practitioners, and organizational leaders concerned with educational freedom in its various forms: (1) the freedom of families to choose schools that they think are best for their children, (2) the freedom of educators to create and maintain distinctive schools, and also (3) the sensitive role of government to promote such freedoms while ensuring that every child receives an adequate education.

ICSCR provides a framework for assessing evidence on the effects of different forms of educational choice, including magnet and charter public schools, controlled choice and inter-district transfer programs, vouchers, tuition tax credits, homeschooling, on-line education and the direct public funding of private schools provided in many countries. We are interested in how educational freedom relates to school effectiveness for diverse groups of students.

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