Charter School Movement Still Going Strong After 25 Years

By Teresa Mull

Twenty-five years ago, Minnesota became the first state in the nation to enact legislation allowing charter schools.

A year after the law passed, City Academy in St. Paul, Minnesota became the first charter school to open its doors in the United States.

Milo Cutter, director of City Academy and one of its founders, says the idea to start the school originated with the students.

“The reason we started the school was because while working with the students, we heard that schools were too big and they felt lost,” Cutter said.

A 2015 study from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, titled A Growing Movement: America’s Largest Charter School Communities, reported, “Charter schools are the fastest-growing choice option in U.S. public education. Over the past five years, student enrollment in charter public schools has grown by 62 percent. In 43 states and the District of Columbia, more than 2.9 million students now attend charter schools—which is more than six percent of the total number of students enrolled in all public schools.”

‘Massive Explosion in Opportunities’
Robert C. Enlow, president and CEO of the CHARTERS, p. 6

Detroit Public Schools Facing Insolvency

By Andrea Dillon

Children enrolled in the Detroit Public Schools (DPS) face an uncertain future, as the system still lacks a viable fiscal plan for the coming year and sustainable, long-term funding.

Earlier in 2016, the Michigan Legislature approved allocating $48.7 million to the Detroit Public Schools to avoid insolvency and a shutdown. The action funded DPS through the end of the school year, but a longer-term fix for the district’s financial woes is still up in the air.

Years of Mismanagement

The financial troubles of the DPS system have been a long time in the making, says Ben DeGraw, director of education policy at the Mackinac Center
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Bills that Would Expand ESA Program in Oklahoma Fail in the Legislature

By Jenni White

Oklahoma won’t be expanding its education savings account (ESA) program, after bills in both legislative houses failed in March on procedural grounds.

Senate Bill 609 and its House companion, House Bill 2949, would have allowed parents to apply for between 30 percent and 90 percent of the funding that would otherwise be spent on each child in public schools. The amount of funding would have been based on family income and would have been used to help pay for myriad education services, including private schools, virtual schools, textbooks, tutoring, and college.

‘Extremely Disappointing’

Brandon Dutcher, senior vice president of the Oklahoma Council for Public Affairs, says the legislature’s continued failure to expand school choice is not because Oklahomans are ambivalent toward the idea.

“It’s extremely disappointing that our political leaders in Oklahoma, where Republicans hold every statewide office and have overwhelming control of both legislative chambers, couldn’t pass a measure that is both good policy and good politics,” Dutcher said.

“We know that Oklahoma parents want educational options,” Dutcher said. “In the last two years, there have been six scientific public-opinion surveys from reputable firms showing that Oklahomans strongly support private school choice options, such as vouchers, tax credits, and ESAs. Republican politicians know that voters, and especially Republican voters, support parental choice.”

Organized Establishment Opposition

A group of public education proponents—superintendents, principals, and teachers—using the hashtag #OklaEd has coordinated messaging efforts within their schools and across social media to oppose ESA bills in the Oklahoma Legislature for the past several years.

Dutcher says those who want to protect the government monopoly “have the tax-funded lobbyists, PR machine, and infrastructure necessary to make the most noise at the capital and on social media,” Dutcher said. “This includes school districts using school resources and school time to mobilize education employees to oppose ESAs.

“Some elected officials recognize this and thus have no problem supporting school choice,” Dutcher said. “But too many others are scared of their own shadow or, in some cases, are just education-establishment Democrats in Republican clothing,” said Dutcher.

Calls for Focus on Individuals

State Rep. Tom Newell (R-Seminole) was the primary author of HB 2003, which sought to accomplish the same goals in 2015 as HB 2949 sought this year. Newell says reform success will require a shift in the education conversation and who controls it.

“It’s amazing to me that [the public education establishment] argument is always a collective one about ‘public education,’ rather than about the individual child. It’s always about public education instead of educating the public. They really do control the narrative, and that’s unfortunate.”

TOM NEWELL, STATE REPRESENTATIVE, SEMINOLE, OKLAHOMA

“It’s amazing to me that [the public education establishment] argument is always a collective one about ‘public education,’ rather than about the individual child. It’s always about public education instead of educating the public. They really do control the narrative, and that’s unfortunate.”

Sacrificing Children for Schools

Dutcher says there’s reason to believe Oklahoma will eventually pass legislation offering more choice in education.

“I don’t think the monopoly can hang on like this year after year,” Dutcher said. “Eventually, our political leaders will come to see the wisdom and the moral clarity in Oklahoma Senate. James Lankford’s question: ‘Why would we ever tell a parent to sacrifice their child’s future so we can protect a school today?’”

Jenni White (jlwplusdmw@gmail.com) writes from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
As Detroit Public Schools Face Insolvency, Legislators Search for Solutions

Continued from page 1

for Public Policy.

“Detroit Public Schools have experienced financial mismanagement for years, ... and state-appointed managers have done nothing to reverse that trend,” DeGrow said. “This [trend] goes back years and years and years.”

DeGrow says much of the financial mismanagement in the city’s schools results from pension agreements and union contract obligations. He says money spent on new schools has often gone unaccounted for and wasted, and revenues have dried up over time as residents have left the city.

“[DPS] has lost more than half of their student population in the last 10 years,” DeGrow said.

House, Senate Divided on Plans

The state Senate passed in March 2016 a bill that, if it becomes law, would split the district in two, with one district existing solely to collect taxes and pay down the debt. The Senate’s plan would also grant a newly formed Detroit Education Commission (DEC) powerful oversight over DPS schools. The legislation, including the cost of DEC, has a price tag of $720 million.

The Senate’s measure faces an uphill battle in the House, which has introduced its own plan to revamp the DPS system. The House plan doesn’t involve creating a new commission.

Peter Lund, Michigan state director for Americans for Prosperity, says the contentious element in the current debate over DPS funding isn’t the creation of a new school district.

“The biggest controversy right now is [about] who actually gets control of [DEC],” Lund said. “Whether it goes directly to the voters, whether the mayor is involved, will the state be involved? What type of oversight? Would there be financial [oversight] ... or beyond that?”

Shortage of Charters

Another problem facing the city’s students and their families is a government-mandated shortage of charter schools.

Lund says the Senate’s plan will block charter schools from being set up, “unless it’s by an existing charter provider that’s got a high rating.”

“I don’t think it’s right that we eliminate the opportunity for other good charter school providers to be able to go in and give more options to the parents and children of Detroit,” Lund said.

Lund says Detroit provides an ideal opportunity for charter schools, which operate essentially as education entrepreneurs filling needs in places where traditional public schools have failed.

“Literally, the Detroit Public Schools have at times had trouble getting toilet paper out to the students in the bathrooms,” Lund said. “I have yet to hear of a charter school where toilet paper was not being provided [and] the basics were not being provided. If that’s the case, let’s let the charter schools educate the kids, and more importantly, let’s let the parents decide where their kids will be educated.”

Andrea Dillon (thell1885@gmail.com) writes from Holly Springs, North Carolina.

Inside the Ivory Tower

Restoring Free Speech and Liberty on Campus

Donald A. Downs

“This book is an indispensable resource to anyone seriously interested in understanding the campus code controversy, or more importantly, the culture of the contemporary American university.”

—James Weinstein, Professor of Constitutional Law, Arizona State University

Academic tenure is viewed with suspicion by many. **Faulty Towers** sets the record straight by elucidating the history, legal status, and common misunderstandings regarding tenure. The book explains how restructuring university incentives to be more in line with those of market-based enterprises would produce greater accountability, stronger boards of trustees, more effective administrators, and a tenure system that protects academic freedom but not substandard education.

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Virginia Governor Vetoes Expanded Choice for Parents of Disabled Kids

By Ashley Bateman

Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe (D) vetoed a bill that would have allowed parents of disabled children to use state funds to customize an education experience suited to their needs. The bill passed both houses of the legislature in March 2016.

In Virginia, parents currently have access to tax credit scholarships, vouchers, and a limited charter school environment. House Bill 389 would have allowed parents of a disabled child to apply for a Parental Choice Education Savings Account and receive up to 90 percent of what is used per student in a public school for one year and would also allow parents to save a portion of the money to pay for postsecondary education. If the bill becomes law, Virginia would join just five other states—Arizona, Florida, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Nevada—that have passed ESA laws.

“Last week, I had the honor to testify before the Virginia House Education Committee on the Parental Choice Education Savings Accounts legislation (HB 389). The bill would create an Education Savings Account (ESA) policy for Virginia families and would allow parents to invest 90% of state-appropriated funds into a savings account to pay for a host of educational activities, including private school tuition and fees, tutoring services, and online classes. The bill targets all students who were enrolled in a Virginia public school for one year and would also allow parents to save a portion of the money to pay for postsecondary education. If the bill becomes law, Virginia would join just five other states—Arizona, Florida, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Nevada—that have passed ESA laws.”


“Not Having Their Needs Met”

Chris Freund, vice president of government relations and communications at The Family Foundation, says the ability to customize an education is especially important for families with special needs.

“The families who testified in favor of ESAs during this year’s General Assembly talked about the limited resources at their particular public school,” Freund said. “Some public schools can afford to provide more resources than others, but no program meets the needs of every family and child, particularly when it comes to kids with special needs.”

LaRock says the system isn’t doing enough to meet the needs of families with disabilities.

“Even though I have three very good school divisions in the legislative district I serve, numerous constituents have expressed their continual frustrations with the special-education services provided,” LaRock said. “It seems that it is practically impossible for our public schools to meet the individual needs of all these students. Even in the best districts and even with federal and state mandates requiring compliance, some of these kids are not having their needs met.

“The unmet need here is huge, and I am certain that individuals and organizations who understand and appreciate the unique challenges special-needs students face will bring free-market principles to bear and supply resources to meet this huge demand,” LaRock said. “That is how ESAs have been effective in other states, and I look forward to unleashing this potential in Virginia.”

“Very Optimistic”

LaRock says McAuliffe has regularly sided with special interests over students.

“Ultimately, we need a new governor who is not beholden to the education establishment before ESAs will become law in the Commonwealth of Virginia,” LaRock said. “I am very encouraged that several candidates who are running to replace the governor, lieutenant governor, and attorney general are enthusiastic supporters of ESAs and other forms of school choice. I am optimistic that by the fall of 2018, we could have much greater education opportunity in Virginia.”

Freund, too, expresses optimism about ESAs.

“The ESA legislation made it further this year than last, and in the legislative process, that’s progress,” Freund said. “In the meantime, should courts issue positive opinions about the constitutionality of ESAs, the support for the proposal should grow.”

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

IN OTHER WORDS . . .

“Last week, I had the honor to testify before the Virginia House Education Committee on the Parental Choice Education Savings Accounts legislation (HB 389). The bill would create an Education Savings Account (ESA) policy for Virginia families and would allow parents to invest 90% of state-appropriated funds into a savings account to pay for a host of educational activities, including private school tuition and fees, tutoring services, and online classes. The bill targets all students who were enrolled in a Virginia public school for one year and would also allow parents to save a portion of the money to pay for postsecondary education. If the bill becomes law, Virginia would join just five other states—Arizona, Florida, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Nevada—that have passed ESA laws.”

Charter Movement Still Going Strong After 25 Years

Continued from page 1

Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, says the credit for the continued growth of charter schools belongs to the people who started the schools and those who spurred the conversation about school choice.

"If you look back to 25 years ago, when there were no charter schools and no real private school choice programs, and you fast-forward to today, [you can see] the massive explosion in opportunities for families and particularly for families from low-income backgrounds," Enlow said.

"[Charter schools] were really the beginning of the dialogue of ‘what a family wants should come first,’" he said. “Now, we’re having conversations about course choice, about competency-based education, about micro-schooling. There are all of these conversations happening, and I think that’s because of charter and private school choice.”

Progress and Setbacks
Cutter says there have been both good and bad changes in the charter school movement over the years.

“The funding has gotten better,” Cutter said. “Our first two years, it wasn’t [the case] the money follows the child. That has definitely changed for the better.”

Cutter says the most disappointing development in the charter school movement has been the increase in regulation.

“If you look at some instances, the paperwork has increased threefold at least,” Cutter said. “That’s probably the biggest [negative change]; it’s kind of an institutional creep. It’s slowly requiring the charters to look more and more like district schools.”

‘Long Way to Go’
Dr. Terry Moe—a professor at Stanford University, senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, and coauthor of Politics, Markets and America’s Schools—says politics is the main challenge to charter schools.

“The expansion of the charter system in each state is really a function of decisions that are made in the political process,” Moe said.

Moe says the movement’s political opponents, especially the teachers unions and many public school districts, have taken action over the past 25 years to stifle development of charter schools.

“That’s the main reason we don’t have more charter schools today,” Moe said. “After 25 years, we have about 6 percent of the kids nationwide in charter schools. That’s not much. … The numbers are often negligible, so I think the charter movement has a long way to go before it achieves its potential and really brings change to the education system.”

Moe says the more charter schools there are, the more parents, students, and those who run the schools there are, and they have a vested interest in protecting the schools and standing up to those who oppose charter schools.

Charter Challenges
Enlow says charter proponents still have a marketing challenge.

“It’s 25 years on, and still large chunks of the American public don’t know what a charter school is,” Enlow said. “We have a lot of information sharing to do.”

‘Pretty Good Place to Be’
Enlow says despite the challenges charter schools face, he says the current situation “is a pretty good place to be.”

“This is a real renaissance for education in America,” Enlow said. “We have a lot more opportunities than we used to have. The great benefit of charter schools and private school choice programs to society is that [they begin] to allow families the freedom to go to a school that works best for them based on their child’s needs. It really does break up the assignment of schools by ZIP code.”

Moe says charter schools are providing an alternative to traditional public schools, many of which are performing poorly, especially in urban areas.

 “[Charters] provide families with much-needed choices,” Moe said. “Families are no longer trapped. You actually have choices in the public school system. If the regular public school is not providing you what you want, maybe then there are charter schools that will.”

“For those who don’t know much about charters, I would say in every aspect of our lives we have the freedom to pick what we want to do, and now in education, we have that same freedom,” Enlow said.

Teresa Mull (tmull@heartland.org) is an education research fellow for The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
Alternative to ACT, SAT Enters the Testing Stage

By Michael McGrady

High school students seeking admission to institutions of higher learning have traditionally had to choose from a limited number of options for aptitude exams accepted on college applications.

Tests such as the ACT and SAT are aligned with Common Core, but as more states reject and replace these national curriculum standards, the need for alternative college testing has become clear.

‘Restore Educational Freedom’
The Vector Assessment of Readiness for College (Vector ARC) is being designed as an alternative college aptitude test that Vector ARC’s website is branding as “non-Common Core” and created to “restore educational freedom.”

Julie West, Vector ARC spokeswoman, said “a team of educators, professionals, and policy makers” developed the Vector ARC exam and have called it “the assessment their peers have been seeking.”

“Our mission is to preserve and restore academic freedom while providing students an equitable assessment,” West said. “ARC is not linked to any specific set of standards.”

Beta Testing
Test writers are currently recruiting participants for beta testing of the exam, the content of which West says reflects more traditional educational standards than Common Core.

“Classic literature and framing documents are featured, rather than more controversial Common Core or AP readings,” West said.

“Although beta testing to date has focused on homeschool students, we believe high-achieving students, socio-economically disadvantaged students, those from private schools, and those in districts that have not fully implemented Common Core will all benefit from ARC,” West said.

See as ‘Promising’ Alternative
David Anderson, head of Asora Education, says Vector ARC could become a viable alternative to Common Core-aligned college entrance exams, but he says more research on the test is needed.

“The Vector ARC is promising, but is not in operation yet,” Anderson said. “It is in beta testing. Some kind of validation research will be needed to certify its value.”

Anderson says something must be done to restore academic honesty to the education system, because Common Core is already undermining the higher-education system in addition to K–12 education.

“Common Core is effectively dumbing-down these colleges,” Anderson said. “It’s an indirect effect of Common Core and is caused by the enormous pressure put on states to revise how they conduct remedial education in state-run colleges.

“If ACT continues to use some of these state-run colleges in its methodology for connecting grades in entry-level courses with the scores students obtained on the ACT tests, it will have a bad effect,” said Anderson.

Michael McGrady (mmcgrady@uccs.edu) writes from Colorado Springs, Colorado.
Underserved Students in Miss. Now Allowed to Cross Districts for Charters

By Matt Hurley

Mississippi students who attend school in districts rated C, D, or F may now cross district lines to attend charter schools.

Mississippi Gov. Phil Bryant (R) signed into law Senate Bill 2161 to “revise the residency requirement for applicants to attend charter schools and to require charter schools to give enrollment preference to underserved children.”

Expanding Opportunities

State Sen. Gray Tollison (R-Oxford), SB 2161’s primary author, says the new law expands charter school access for the state’s children.

“Unfortunately, we do have schools that are not meeting the expectation of providing a good education the child deserves,” Tollison said. “We’re creating choices for parents if they feel the public school is not meeting the needs of their child. Two-hundred and fifty students in Jackson have exercised that right. They say it’s an environment that is conducive to learning [and] the parents are very engaged. [The students] talked to enjoy the school; it’s very academically focused.

“It just gives choices to parents in schools that aren’t performing well,” Tollison said. “Hopefully, this will create some competition in the public school district to improve schools that aren’t performing well.”

‘Empower Children and Families’

Rachel Canter, executive director of Mississippi First, says charter schools are very engaged. “The students are very engaged. They feel the needs of their child.” Tollison said. “Hopefully, this will create some competition in the public school district to improve schools that aren’t performing well.”

South Dakota Approves Tax Credit Scholarship Program

By Andy Torbett

South Dakota Gov. Dennis Daugaard (R) signed into law a bill giving low-income families financial aid to spend on educational alternatives for their children.

Senate Bill 159, the Partners in Education Tax Credit Program, will provide scholarships to parents to cover education-related expenses. They will be funded by money donated by insurance companies to a scholarship fund, and the companies will receive a tax credit worth 80 percent of the money donated. Only insurance companies required to pay the state’s premium and annuity tax are eligible to receive the tax credit.

The educational scholarships grant up to 82 percent of what the state allocates for a student in the public school system to eligible students who belong to a household with an income less than 150 percent of the amount that qualifies students for free or reduced-priced lunches.

SB 159 will provide a maximum of $2 million for students to use on private school education in the state.

‘Empowering Parents’

State Sen. Phyllis Heineman (R-Sioux Falls), SB 159’s primary sponsor, says the legislation is about putting power in parents’ hands.

“SB 159 is really about honoring parents’ ability to determine the best educational opportunity for their children, according to their values and the child’s needs,” Heineman said. “Empowering parents to make that decision makes them a truly engaged partner in their child’s education.”

Inspiring Public School Participation

Heineman says the tax credit program and similar initiatives give even public school personnel the opportunity to embrace education choice.

“It’s a new concept in South Dakota,” Heineman said. “It is our responsibility to make the program a success to ensure a favorable public opinion going into the future. We will need to highlight positive experiences from families from across the state who receive these tuition scholarships.”

Challengers ‘Grasping at Straws’

Matt Frendeway, national communications director for the Federation for Children, says teachers unions that have brought lawsuits to try to block students from exercising their right to school choice have failed historically.

“I can only hope they’ll recognize what’s best for students and respect any parent who exercises their right to school choice,” Frendeway said.

Heineman says she’s not concerned about opponents arguing SB 159 is unconstitutional.

“We are confident that this program is constitutional,” Heineman said. “We are confident that this program is constitutional and opponents of parental choice are grasping at straws in an attempt to obstruct parents from exercising their right to school choice.”

South Dakota Gov. Dennis Daugaard issued letters of intent to open 14 new charter schools in the state.

“We think the word is getting out that we have a good environment for school choice,” said Tollison.

Andy Torbett (meconservativevoice@gmail.com) writes from Atkinson, Maine.

Matt Hurley (wmdtv matt@yahoo.com) writes from Cincinnati, Ohio.

Addressing a Nationwide Need

Frendeway says SB 159 addresses a serious need prevalent across the country.

“School choice exists nationwide, but in most states, it’s only available [to] those who have the means to move to a new home that’s zoned to a quality school or can afford to pay private school tuition.”

Andy Torbett (meconservativevoice@gmail.com) writes from Atkinson, Maine.
By Andrea Dillon

A bill to end the use of Common Core education standards in Kansas was defeated during a House floor vote after passing the state’s House Education Committee.

House Bill 2292 would have replaced Common Core with new, non-federal standards that would have been implemented by the Kansas State Board of Education by July 1, 2017. HB 2292 would have rescinded any existing agreements and prohibited any future ones made with the federal government requiring the use of Common Core, and it included provisions to protect student privacy and safeguard against data mining.

The House rejected the bill in a 78–44 vote.

Prior to the floor vote, HB 2292 was subjected to severe scrutiny and hours of debate.

Duke Pesta, academic director of the Freedom Project Academy, addressed the Kansas Education Committee prior to its vote, at the request of state Rep. Tony Barton (R-Leavenworth), an anti-Common Core activist in Kansas.

“The simple, two-hour talk was laid out carefully from the perspective of Arne Duncan, David Coleman, and Bill Gates—the former U.S. secretary of education, the lead architect of Common Core, and the financier-in-chief for the standards, respectively,” said Pesta.

 “[The talk] presented the problems with Common Core through the words of the people who created it,” Pesta said. “It had quite an impact on many of the committee members, generating enough votes to move the bill out of committee after numerous failed attempts. All of the Republicans present, including those who had been voting with the Democrats, changed their votes on the spot.”

Pesta says pressure from outside groups was enough to influence lawmakers to vote against HB 2292. “Corporations and businesses are promising money and power. However, more than that, they are threatening the lawmakers that if you don’t do this, we won’t support you.”

State Rep. Ron Highland (R-Wamego), a member of the Education Committee, agrees outside players swayed the vote.

“Because we didn’t run it on the floor quickly, the opponents obviously had time to really chew on the ear of all of those folks and threaten them and so forth,” Highland said.

“Corporations and businesses are promising money and power. However, more than that, they are threatening the lawmakers that if you don’t do this, we won’t support you.”

DUKE PESTA, ACADEMIC DIRECTOR
FREEDOM PROJECT ACADEMY

“You know how they are, particularly the teachers unions,” Highland said. “They’re not as powerful as they used to be, but they still make a lot of noise. Because of all their staff in the [Kansas National Education Association] and the school board and association of superintendents, they all have staff, and they put out messages every day.”

Highland says those who want to do away with Common Core need to refocus the discussion at the local level.

“What we will be doing this year, this summer and fall, is to reframe the discussion and say, ‘If you really want this changed, because of our Constitution and our laws in our state, you have to go to the state school board,’” Highland said.

Highland says parents should talk to their local school boards because they, according to state law, control the curriculum at the local level.

Andrea Dillon (thell1885@gmail.com) writes from Holly Springs, North Carolina.
Guv’s Inaction Lets Charters Survive in Washington

By Mary Tillotson

Washington State Gov. Jay Inslee (D) took no action on Senate Bill 6194, allowing it to become law without his signature.

The new law funds Washington State charter schools from an account in the state’s budget that uses proceeds from the state lottery.

Constitutionality Problem

Washingtonians have been battling over charter schools for years.

In 2012, voters approved Washington Initiative 1240 to create a public charter school system. In September 2015, the Washington Supreme Court became the first court to completely overturn charter school legislation. It determined the law was unconstitutional because of the schools’ funding source: the state’s general fund.

Liv Finne, director of the Center for Education at the Washington Policy Center, says SB 6194 solves the constitutionality problem.

“The [Washington] Supreme Court had said, in a completely illogical fashion, that this funding of charter schools [in the 2012 law] is not constitutional because they’re not ‘common schools’... [and therefore] can’t receive money from the general fund, because the general fund has a separate fund for common schools.” Finne said. “The fact that there is a common school fund in the general fund contaminated all the rest of the [general] funds. The neat solution is to fund charter schools from a separate account.”

The new law went into effect in April and allows charter schools to be funded from the Opportunity Pathways Fund, which is funded by the state lottery.

Tumultuous Journey

Finne says the past few months were difficult for families and charter school leaders, but the struggles brought greater public support.

“This [process] has been agonizing [and] also very unifying,” Finne said. “I think the attack on charters by the state’s supreme court made them more sympathetic to the general public.”

Charter advocacy organizations ran a campaign, including TV ads, rallies, and testimonies, in support of charter schools.

“The union was saying it was mostly rich white kids in charter schools, and they were taking money from traditional schools,” Finne said. “There were children on TV saying, ‘I love my charter school.’ They were African-American, Hispanic, white. It was clear that these were low-income families [and] kids who wanted to keep their opportunities.”

“The future looks hopeful. Families are very eager to enroll in these schools. Those already attending had a fantastic first year of school.”

MAGGIE MEYERS, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS
WASHINGTON STATE CHARTER SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION

By Andrea Dillon

The Colorado Senate has passed a bill that, according to its own language, intends on “increasing charter schools’ access to resources.”

The text of Senate Bill 16-188 requires a school district “to distribute revenue it receives from ongoing local property tax mill levies equally, on a per-student basis, to the school district charter schools.”

An amended version of the bill passed the state Senate with a 22–13 vote on May 3 and awaits approval in the House.

Charters Shortchanged

Dan Schaller, director of advocacy at the Colorado League of Charter Schools, says individual school districts in the state can currently appeal to voters for a “mill levy override.” A mill levy override is revenue collected from extra property taxes that schools typically use for specific needs, such as technology, after-school programs, and early-childhood education.

Schaller says school districts are not distributing these overrides equally between traditional public school students and charter school students. The disparity in distribution of these override taxes is estimated to shortchange charters by $20 million to $25 million per year.

“What we have seen is that there’s a wide variance in how much different districts distribute to their charter schools,” Schaller said. “Some districts do a great job of sharing equitably, or very close to it, but then there are a number of others that do not, that share next to nothing or nothing at all or somewhere in the middle.”

Eighty Cents on the Dollar

Schaller says when a mill levy override is passed for a specific program or grade level that pertains to a charter school, school districts should share funds equally.

“Charter school students represent 12 percent of the K–12 population,” Schaller said. “If charter schools were combined into their own district, they would be the largest district in the State of Colorado at this point. And yet, despite those big numbers, we still see that the typical charter school student is receiving 80 cents on the dollar compared with regular, traditional public school peers.”

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MAGGIE MEYERS, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS
WASHINGTON STATE CHARTER SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION

By Andrea Dillon

The Colorado Senate has passed a bill that, according to its own language, intends on “increasing charter schools’ access to resources.”

The text of Senate Bill 16-188 requires a school district “to distribute revenue it receives from ongoing local property tax mill levies equally, on a per-student basis, to the school district charter schools.”

An amended version of the bill passed the state Senate with a 22–13 vote on May 3 and awaits approval in the House.

Charters Shortchanged

Dan Schaller, director of advocacy at the Colorado League of Charter Schools, says individual school districts in the state can currently appeal to voters for a “mill levy override.” A mill levy override is revenue collected from extra property taxes that schools typically use for specific needs, such as technology, after-school programs, and early-childhood education.

Schaller says school districts are not distributing these overrides equally between traditional public school students and charter school students. The disparity in distribution of these override taxes is estimated to shortchange charters by $20 million to $25 million per year.

“What we have seen is that there’s a wide variance in how much different districts distribute to their charter schools,” Schaller said. “Some districts do a great job of sharing equitably, or very close to it, but then there are a number of others that do not, that share next to nothing or nothing at all or somewhere in the middle.”

Eighty Cents on the Dollar

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Tenn. Gives Educators Power to Choose How to Use State Testing Results

By Michael McGrady

Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam (R) has signed into law a bill giving teachers and schools the choice of whether to use state testing results in their faculty evaluations.

The state’s standardized test for primary and secondary school students, known as TNReady, has been mired in controversy since it debuted in February 2016. Students, teachers, parents, and administrators have expressed frustration over the state assessment, which was supposed to be taken online but was so fraught with technical glitches the testing system crashed.

Sen. Bob Smith, a Murfreesboro School Board member, has a daughter in the 4th grade who has taken the TNReady test. Smith says she thinks her daughter has received more standardized testing than her children in middle and high school.

“Scores are not given in time to be useful on any level. We are also not confident in the validity of the test, the appropriateness of the questions, and the way in which it is evaluated.”

Jessica Fogarty, a mother and member of the Tullahoma City School Board, says the currently untested TNReady test does not provide a valid assessment of students or teachers.

“ESAs give parents and students [who] are struggling in the traditional settings another choice to improve the education for their children, and that’s why it’s so important. The bottom line is to improve education.”

Activism from the School Boards

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“ESAs give parents and students [who] are struggling in the traditional settings another choice to improve the education for their children, and that’s why it’s so important. The bottom line is to improve education.”

Michael McGrady (mmcgrady@ucs.edu) writes from Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Arizona Bill Would Expand Scholarship Accounts

By Mary Tillotson

An Arizona bill to expand eligibility for the state’s empowerment scholarship account (ESA) program passed the state’s Senate, went through several committees of the House of Representatives, but never came up for a vote in the House before the legislative session ended.

Arizona’s ESA program provides students with $5,400 per year to use on education. It currently benefits students with disabilities; those attending public schools rated D or F by the state’s ranking system; students who have been adopted through the foster care system; those living on Native American reservations; students with active-duty military parents; and children whose parents were killed in the line of duty in the military.

Senate Bill 1279 would have extended ESA eligibility to all students who meet the family income eligibility requirements for free or reduced-price lunches, after a three-year phase-in period. Public School Leaders’ Worries

SB 1279 is a revised version of legislation presented by the primary sponsor, state Sen. Debbie Lesko (R-Peoria), earlier in the session to expand ESA eligibility by the 2018–19 school year to any child who attends a public school in grades K–12.

Public school leaders have expressed concern over a potential mass exodus from government schools if the ESA program is expanded. The program currently allows only 0.5 percent of the state’s students, or about 5,500 students total, to join each year. SB 1279 would have lifted that cap in 2019.

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“I think the program helps children [who] are disadvantaged and need it most,” Butcher said. “It would be a tremendous help for them. We should be giving parents the ability to make a choice between what their district offers and using an ESA.”

Lesko says she sent her children to traditional public schools but knows from experience the importance of choice.

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DEBBIE LESKO, STATE SENATOR, PEORIA, ARIZONA

Michael McGrady (mmcgrady@ucs.edu) writes from Colorado Springs, Colorado.

“If public schools are going to go out of business because half a percent of all the students are leaving, ... they have bigger problems than empowerment scholarship accounts,” Lesko said.

Helping the Disadvantaged

Jonathan Butcher, education director at the Goldwater Institute, says expanding eligibility for ESAs would give options to those who aren’t getting what they need in public schools.

“I think the program helps children [who] are disadvantaged and need it most,” Butcher said. “It would be a tremendous help for them. We should be giving parents the ability to make a choice between what their district offers and using an ESA.”

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Lesko says she sent her children to traditional public schools but knows from experience the importance of choice.

“When my daughter was going to school, there was a boy who was being bullied, terribly bullied, so his mother took him out of the public school and homeschooled him,” Lesko said. “Every once in a while you have situations like that, where the student could use this money for online education or tutoring or that type of thing. Not all children thrive in a public school setting.

“ESAs give parents and students [who] are struggling in the traditional settings another choice to improve the education for their children, and that’s why it’s so important,” Lesko said. “The bottom line is to improve education.”

Mary Tillotson (mary.c.tillotson@gmail.com) writes from Ann Arbor, Michigan.
Florida Rejects Bill Making Coding an Alternative to Foreign Language

By Ashley Bateman

A Florida bill that would have allowed high school students to replace foreign language courses with computer coding classes was rejected in the state House after passing in the Senate by a wide margin.

Senate Bill 468 passed the Senate by a 35–5 vote, but it never came to a vote in the House. The bill would have authorized public high schools in the state to offer specialized coding courses and would have required Florida College System institutions and state universities to accept identified coding credits as foreign language credits.

‘Should at Least Be on the Menu’

William Mattox, director of the James Madison Institute’s Marshall Center for Educational Options, says the more choices students have, the better.

“Learning how to code is something that more and more people entering the workforce need to know, and it’s something that interests a lot of young people,” Mattox said. “It’s certainly not a course for everyone and in no way diminishes offering courses in computer science and in no way diminishes the importance of other things. But in an increasingly specialized marketplace, having specialized skills is increasingly important. For high school students, to have the option to take a computer coding course … makes a lot of sense. It should at least be on the menu.”

Students Missing Out?

A group of ethnic advocacy organizations issued a statement denouncing the bill.

The Florida chapter of the League of United Latin American Citizens, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s Florida Conference and Miami-Dade branch, and the Spanish American League Against Discrimination issued a joint statement in which they said, “To define coding and computer science as a foreign language is a misleading and mischievous misnomer that deceives our students, jeopardizes their eligibility to admission to universities, and will result in many losing out on the foreign language skills they desperately need even for entry-level jobs in South Florida.”

College-Level Precedent

Mattox says the opponents’ argument ignores well-established college policies in Florida.

“There in Florida, there are two flagship universities, Florida State and the University of Florida,” Mattox said. “[They] require several courses in foreign language, but they do allow that to be covered by taking American sign language, and both schools allow communication majors to take business language courses rather than taking foreign language, if they wish. Given that we have a precedent at the college level for substituting computer science for foreign language, I don’t see it being very radical if we do that at the high school level.”

Mattox says some exposure to computer coding in high school would particularly benefit those students who want to study in one or more of the science, technology, engineering, and math fields.

Prefers Free-Market Alternative

Lennie Jarratt, education project manager for The Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News, says students and their parents should decide what classes the children take, not the state.

“This is where school choice comes into play,” Jarratt said. “More and more states are trying to push computer coding, and instead they should be allowing students to take any class they want to take. Having a free market could do this much better than the schools trying to push this through.

“I don’t see passing a coding bill as a real need, because there are a lot of places out there right now already training young people for technology with certifications,” said Jarratt. “There are a number of private-industry options for that training.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.
Advocacy Group Presses to Reverse Reforms

By Kenneth Artz

Too many states rely on standardized testing, have too many charter schools and other school choice options, and don’t pay teachers enough, states a new report by the Network for Public Education, a group led by education historian and policy advocate Diane Ravitch.

Valuing Public Education: A 50-State Report Card rates the states A–F, based on the group’s policy positions in areas such as teacher evaluation and compensation, testing, and financial support for traditional public schools.

‘A Hit Piece on School Choice’

Jason Bedrick, a policy analyst for the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom and a former member of the New Hampshire state legislature, says Ravitch’s study is useless because it doesn’t look at educational outcomes.

“It’s nothing more than a hit piece on school choice,” Bedrick said.

Bedrick says the Ravitch study is a response to education researcher Matthew Ladner’s Foundation for Excellence in Education study, the 20th edition of the Report Card on American Education, published in November 2015, which gives positive grades to states with school choice options.

“The research shows school choice not only helps the students enrolled in school choice programs but those also in public schools,” Bedrick said.

Educational Left’s ‘Manifesto’

Ladner, a senior advisor for policy and research at the Foundation for Excellence in Education, says the Ravitch study will have no impact outside the circles it was designed to reach, because Ravitch is preaching to the choir.

“(Ravitch) should be measuring outcomes, but instead, she’s writing for a group of far-left college educators, and this is their manifesto,” Ladner said. “This is clearly an ideological statement, because there are no considerations for outcomes like test scores or test score trends.”

MATTHEW LADNER
SENIOR ADVISOR FOR POLICY AND RESEARCH FOUNDATION FOR EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

Teachers Unions, Allies Rally Against Charter Expansion in L.A.

By Andy Torbett

Teachers unions and public school board members have combined their efforts in an all-out campaign to block and eliminate charter schools in the City of Los Angeles, by engaging in “walk-ins” and public outrage campaigns against school choice.

Los Angeles charter school advocates recently outlined plans to enroll half of the district’s students in charter schools by 2023. To show their opposition to the proposal to expand charter school programs, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten and sympathizers took part in rallies across the country. Weingarten said stopping the expansion of charter schools in Los Angeles is one of her “highest priorities,” and in an article for The Huffington Post, Weingarten called the proposal “a coordinated national effort to decimate public schools.”

Union First, Students Last

Vicki Alger, a research fellow at the Independent Institute, says teachers union leaders believe their priority is to increase membership and the resulting membership dues.

“As the late [AFT] President Albert Shanker reputedly said decades ago, ‘When school children start paying union dues, that’s when I’ll start representing the interests of school children,’” Alger said.

“The ‘union first, student last’ approach has taken its toll on academic achievement and is the main reason many parents are looking for alternatives,” Alger says.

“Parents are the ultimate accountability assurance when it comes to their child’s learning,” Alger said. “That’s why parents nationwide are fighting for greater parental choice in education, including access to quality public schools through parent trigger laws and non-public school options through tax credit scholarships and educational savings account programs. Los Angeles parents are no exception.”

Lowering Standards, Taxpayers Pay the Price

The Los Angeles Unified School District—the nation’s second largest, with more than 900 schools—has lowered its standards in an effort to increase graduation rates and, according to some, to suggest they match the high success rate of charter schools.

Alger says this strategy does nothing but cause harm.

“Lowering passing scores and watering down core course content to inflate performance may make some public school adults feel better about themselves, but students and taxpayers pay the biggest price later on, in the form of higher high school dropout rates, college remediation rates, and diminished basic skills that are critical to a thriving workforce and economy,” Alger said.

Brought Down by Bureaucracy

Mary Clare Reim, an education research associate at The Heritage Foundation, says bureaucracy is another factor in the declining quality of education in public schools.

“A teacher’s main directive is to improve the academic outcomes of their students and help them achieve meaningful learning,” Reim said. “When those terms are narrowly defined, due to bureaucratic laws or a rigid testing structure, teachers have a more difficult time reaching those goals. Policies should be designed to give families the flexibility to pursue the education that works best for them.”

Andy Torbett (meconservativevoice@gmail.com) writes from Atkinson, Maine.

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VICKI ALGER
RESEARCH FELLOW INDEPENDENT INSTITUTE
California Scholars Call for End to Common Core

By Andy Torbett

California has joined a growing number of states now facing mounting outcry against Common Core State Standards.

The California Alliance of Researchers for Equity in Education (CAREE), which brings together more than 100 university-based education researchers, released a Research Brief titled “Common Core State Standards Assessments in California: Concerns and Recommendations,” in February 2016. The authors call for an end to high-stakes testing in the state, citing research showing a lack of compelling evidence Common Core standards have improved education.

The CAREE authors dismiss Common Core assessments as lacking “validity, reliability, and fairness.” Although some Common Core critics oppose all high-stakes standardized testing, Lance Izumi, senior fellow and director of education studies at the Pacific Research Institute, says most of those opposing Common Core are concerned about the quality of the standards and their accompanying tests.

“Their problem with Common Core testing rests on practical concerns with the validity of the tests themselves, with the type of knowledge they are trying to measure, with empirically unsupported instructional methodologies promoted by Common Core, and with the centralization of education policymaking in the federal government in education in standards, testing, and curricula to an extent unimagined by our Founding Fathers.”

Vicki Alger, research fellow at the Independent Institute, says the word “education” does not appear in the Constitution “for a very good reason.”

“Izumi says opposition to Common Core is representative of the deepening divide between the public and the government.”

“The disconnect between public and policymakers over Common Core is yet another example of how the elite forces of the establishment are trying to force an unpopular policy on grassroots Americans,” Izumi said. “Constitutionally, education is supposed to be a local concern, but Common Core has involved the federal government in education in standards, testing, and curricula to an extent unimagined by our Founding Fathers.”

“Izumi says opposition to Common Core is representative of the deepening divide between the public and the government.”

“Each individual state should repeal the national Common Core standards and tests that it adopted,” Izumi said. “Each state should then adopt its own rigorous state standards and tests. California and Massachusetts, for example, had tough state standards and tests, and these should be used as models by other states. Finally, to ensure that schools make the best use of these truly state-based standards and tests, universal school choice programs should also be adopted to empower all parents and their children and to force local public schools and school districts to improve their performance and satisfy their customers.”

“What students need is more opportunities for personalized learning, not more high-priced government ‘fixes,’” Alger said.

Andy Torbett (meconservativevoice@gmail.com) writes from Atkinson, Maine.
Ohio Seeks Public Input to Update State Standards

By Matt Hurley

A fter several failed attempts by the state legislature to rid Ohio of Common Core, the Ohio General Assembly has tasked the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) with updating Ohio’s learning standards for the first time since the state adopted Common Core in 2010.

For the third year in a row, in April students took a revised version of the state’s standardized exam, which is aligned with Common Core, after those involved with the 2015 test deemed it too long and said it included content that did not correspond to the grade levels to which the tests were administered.

ODE received more than 1,000 comments from individuals and groups responding to a public survey about revisions to the standards. The board has also formed advisory committees and working groups to help with the process.

According to the ODE website, the working groups and advisory committees aim to have a draft of revised standards for English and math available for public comment by July 2016. Revisions of science, social studies, and financial literacy standards are set to begin in fall 2016. The goal is to have the revised standards approved by the State Board of Education in December 2016, in time to prepare materials in 2017 for the 2017–18 school year.

Common Core Defects

Emmett McGroarty, director of education for the American Principles Project, says Common Core is a low-quality curriculum.

“The Common Core standards are of poor, highly defective quality,” McGroarty said. “By 8th grade, children are two years behind their peers in high-performing countries. Moreover, they have been deprived of having a comfortable academic progression to be ready for [science, technology, engineering, and math] studies, or even for admission to a competitive university for study in the liberal arts.

“Common Core is especially damaging to disadvantaged children,” McGroarty said. “Children from well-to-do families can avail themselves of private schooling or private tutors in order to work around Common Core’s defects.”

Revision ‘Both Smart and Necessary’

Chad Aldis, vice president of Ohio policy and advocacy at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, which advocated for implementation of Common Core, says the comprehensive review process developed by ODE at the direction of the Ohio General Assembly is a positive step toward needed improvement of the state’s standards.

“We believe this review is both smart and necessary,” Aldis said. “The Common Core State Standards provided a very strong starting point for Ohio’s learning standards, but as time goes on, it’s important that the state, listening to Ohio teachers, continues to modify and improve the standards. The State Board of Education and department deserve praise for establishing a comprehensive process that allows everyone’s voice to be heard.”

Massachusetts Homeschooling Families Report Being Investigated

By Jenni White

Six homeschooling families in Massachusetts say they are being subjected to unnecessary inquiries by the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (MDCF) for alleged educational neglect.

‘Comes Up Over and Over’

Bill Heuer, a member of the board of directors for the Massachusetts Home Learning Association, says he’s not surprised by the reports.

“This comes up over and over again,” Heuer said.

Heuer says though it’s easy to homeschool in Massachusetts, there’s a “gray area” in state education law that makes room for such investigations.

Massachusetts is an “approval” state, meaning the district superintendent must approve a homeschooling family’s education plan. Heuer says miscommunication can arise when some districts interpret the law to mean families need the approval of the superintendent before they remove a child to homeschool.

Hostility Toward Leavers

Heuer says unfriendly district superintendents can report children from families in transition to homeschool as truant and turn them over to MDCF. Once they have the case, families can get caught up in reams of paperwork to rectify the situation.

“Communication beforehand prevents the issue from cropping up. A little communication goes a long way,” Heuer said.

Troubling Phrasing

Mike Donnelly, staff attorney and director of global outreach at the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), says he’s not certain whether there is an MDCF policy prompting the investigations, but the inquiries do seem intrusive.

“I’ve worked for 10 years in Massachusetts, and my experience has been that so long as families comply with the homeschooling laws, if there’s a truancy issue, the state has said that it’s between the homeschool families and the school,” Donnelly said. “Now there’s this phrase I’m hearing, that homeschoolers are ‘not visible in the community’ and so therefore [MDCF] has to be more intrusive [and] more involved in the family to see what’s going on.

“I’m not trying to say there’s a conspiracy and the state is out to get homeschoolers, but from our perspective, the repetition of this phrase is troubling,” Donnelly said.

“I deal with a lot of social services people, and I’ve never really heard that [phrase] before, and now I’ve heard it in four different situations four different times,” Donnelly said. “Not only that, but we have a legal staff of 20 people who deal with 50 states, and we talk. That hasn’t come up before.”

Donnelly says he hopes the investigations are not intentional harassment, but HSLDA is looking into the investigations.

Jenni White (jlwplusdmw@gmail.com) writes from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
Oklahoma Common Core Replacement Criticized

By Jenni White

New academic standards to replace Common Core in Oklahoma are set to go into effect despite prominent scholars telling the state’s legislature the replacement standards are flawed.

House Bill 3399 repealed Common Core in Oklahoma in 2014. A provision of the bill mandated the Oklahoma Legislature review the new Oklahoma Academic Standards (OAS) upon their completion and, if necessary, return portions of the standards to the Oklahoma State Board of Education (OSBE) for corrections.

OSBE had two years to write the new standards, but it did not begin the process in earnest until February 2015, after the election of a new state superintendent of public instruction, Joy Hofmeister. The final draft of the new OAS was presented to the Oklahoma Legislature for review in February 2016.

Numerous Criticisms

Several organizations and individuals—including noted academic scholars Sandra Stotsky, of the University of Arkansas, and Larry Gray, a math professor at the University of Minnesota who has developed state math standards—evaluated the new OAS and reported numerous flaws to the legislature.

The House and Senate approved the new standards pending revisions, but neither chamber acted on the other chamber’s legislation before time expired. The standards will go into effect as written unless OSBE changes them.

‘A Rogue Board of Education’

State Sen. Josh Brecheen (R-Coalgate), the primary author of HB 3399, says OSBE is to blame for the flawed law going into effect. “The issue isn’t with [HB] 3399,” Brecheen said. “That bill was very well-written. We believe we have a rogue board of education on this issue. You’ve got a member of [OSBE] who was not only on the Standards Writing Steering Committee but [also] on the lawsuit against the state to keep Common Core essentially saying that even if [OSBE] gets them back to fix [the standards], they won’t fix them, regardless of what the speaker of the House says.”

“I think they knew the law was in their favor,” Brecheen said.

‘This Was Planned’

State Rep. Dan Fisher (R-El Reno) says adopting the legislation without action by the legislature happened by design.

“[OSBE] ran the clock out on us,” Fisher said. “They had two years to do these standards according to [HB] 3399, but they blew one of those years suing us. This was planned; there’s no question.”

‘Hofmeister’s Claim Falls Flat’

When both Stotsky and Gray criticized the final standards, Hofmeister said their critiques were superfluous because they were not from Oklahoma and OAS was to be created by Oklahomans for Oklahomans.

“At least half of the professional reviewers have said there are problems with [the new standards],” Fisher said. “They’ve confirmed what Stotsky and Gray are saying. In the end, they’re all confirming one another. In that case, Hofmeister’s claim falls flat when you look at the Oklahoma reviewers who are saying the same thing.

“Stotsky has written the standards that produced the best [National Assessment of Educational Progress] standards in the United States,” Fisher said. “The most recognized education standards experts in the country, and [Hofmeister] doesn’t want to consider their reviews?”

‘This Isn’t Over’

Brecheen says the fight for better standards in Oklahoma will continue until OSBE does what it was supposed to do.

“This won’t be over in Oklahoma until we actually have adoption of an assessment,” said Brecheen.

“If we adopt a Common Core-compliant assessment, we will have lost the ability to create a true Common Core repeal.”

Jenni White (jlwplusdmw@gmail.com) writes from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
N.D. GOP Candidates Promise to Eliminate Common Core Standards

By Jenni White

Candidates running for spots on the Republican ticket in North Dakota this election season are using anti-Common Core rhetoric to woo voters.

Leah Peterson, a member of Stop Common Core North Dakota, says opposition to Common Core was a prevalent message from would-be candidates at the North Dakota Republican Convention this year.

“I was there. We had many anti-Common Core activists lined up to be delegates,” Peterson said. “This is ultimately what put the gears in motion to come out against Common Core for some in the party. It’s an election year.”

Peterson says empty rhetoric won’t satisfy voters who are against Common Core.

“In the days ahead of us, the decisions [voters] make will show whether they feel the political winds of change and truly believe the things [candidates] are now saying,” Peterson said. “To date, there has been no action to remove North Dakota from Common Core or [the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium].”

Bill Failed in 2015

Twelve North Dakota House Republicans sponsored House Bill 1461 in 2015. The measure would have stopped the use of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), a testing system aligned with Common Core, and would have created a committee to develop new, state-derived education standards.

By a vote of 9–4, the bill failed to pass the Education Committee in the Republican-dominated legislature.

This year, candidates for state office, including current superintendent of public instruction, Kirsten Baesler, a former Common Core supporter, are attempting to assure voters of their commitment to remove SBAC testing and create state-specific North Dakota education standards.

“Prior to the 2016 Republican Convention, the incumbent superintendent of public instruction [Baesler] traveled to numerous GOP district conventions and told delegates she intended on getting the state out of Common Core,” said Steve Cates, former North Dakota representative to the Education Commission of the States and lead plaintiff in Cates v. Baesler, a lawsuit to remove North Dakota from SBAC.

Peterson says Baesler was a staunch Common Core supporter for months prior to the convention and has only recently changed her tune.

Promises Accountability

Cates is not convinced the candidates actually intend to rid the state of Common Core or SBAC.

[Baesler] said she would not do anything until the state standards are reviewed and the interim legislative Education Committee makes recommendations,” Cates said.

Cates says Stop Common Core activists’ objective is the state’s full withdrawal from the Common Core State Standards.

“Anything less, and we will do all that is in our power to ensure there are political repercussions for those that chose not to support ending Common Core in North Dakota,” Cates said.

Jenni White (jlwplusdmw@gmail.com) writes from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

New York Students, Parents, and Teachers Criticized for Opting Out of State Testing

By Jenni White

The New York Post recently published an article strongly criticizing parents who choose not to have their children take state-mandated standardized tests.

“The Common Core opt-out movement is parents who can’t handle their kids failing,” wrote Naomi Schaefer Riley in the article.

The April 10 article claims “upper-middle class white parents get worked up about tests in school” after pushing their kids early on, only to opt them out of testing later on, rather than see them fail.

“The parents have a variety of issues, but one that comes up over and over is that kids in elementary school simply spend too much time taking tests and studying for tests, which deprives them of other experiences,” wrote Riley. “Not only does it reduce time spent on art and music, but it also reduces free time and recess.

“What they fail to realize, though, is that they have only themselves to blame,” Riley said.

“These helicopter parents are the ones who for decades have pushed their children to succeed academically at younger and younger ages,” wrote Riley, who goes on to say the “helicopter parents” are the ones opting their children out of standardized testing.

Riley says pulling children out of standardized testing “deprive[s] parents, schools and taxpayers of valuable information about how well (or badly) we are educating our kids.”

Common Experience

Yvonne Gasperino, founder and administrator of the Stop Common Core in New York State Facebook page, says harassment of opt-out students and parents is a common experience readers don’t see in the news, but it is well-known among parents active within the test-refusal movement.

“We have received many personal testimonies from parents across the state each year explaining their personal stories of intimidation tactics, favoritism … grade extortion, personal phone calls by some teachers trying to influence the parent’s decision, bribery via contests with monetary or other rewards, and exerting authority over the children who refused …” Gasperino said.

Such harassment is not confined to New York.

The Opt Out Florida Network says on its website, “Since testing began in Florida on February 29, parents have reported incidences of retaliation, bullying, and intimidation from numerous districts across the state. Because the state has not seen fit to acknowledge parents’ rights to direct their children’s education, children who opt out are forced to sit and stare for hours, without a state mandate that they do so.”

Gasperino says she frequently hears from parents who are reluctant to speak out publicly for fear of retribution against their children, especially during testing season. Schools and others should not intimidate parents for exercising their rights, Gasperino says.

“No child should be put into these situations by any adult,” Gasperino said.

Jenni White (jlwplusdmw@gmail.com) writes from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
Do All Students Need to Master High-Level Math?

By Jay Lehr, Ph.D., and Dick Geyer

It is safe to say the United States has run off the rails of realistic, intelligent training of its young people in mathematics, especially in algebra and calculus, while missing the great need for becoming well-trained in general numeracy, the science of simple numbers, and in statistics that now affect everyday life.

The U.S. education system uses mathematics as a bar for students to jump over to get admitted into an exclusive college or to make a particular profession appear sophisticated, even if the training is unnecessary. The field has been dominated by teachers more interested in impressing us with their importance than in offering useful skills, and the terrible, one-size-fits-all Common Core education standards being adopted across the nation are compounding the problem.

One of the greatest errors made by Common Core proponents and others who advocate for greater federal control of the nation’s education system is the push for and reform of the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) curriculum. So-called education experts say the nation needs its entire school and mathematics (STEM) curriculum. The field has been dominated by teachers more interested in impressing us with their importance than in offering useful skills, and the terrible, one-size-fits-all Common Core education standards being adopted across the nation are compounding the problem.

One of the greatest problems made by Common Core proponents and others who advocate for greater federal control of the nation’s education system is the push for and reform of the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) curriculum. So-called education experts say the nation needs its entire school population to be highly trained in mathematics for the country to survive, and that without a greater emphasis on math and science, American students will fall even further behind the rest of the world.

Coming forward to refute this claim and show its deleterious effects on our high school and college students is Andrew Hacker and his book The Math Myth. Hacker documents the problems with requiring all students, even those with no interest or aptitude for it, to take high-level math courses, and he demonstrates the importance of promoting a more beneficial type of math standard.

A Disservice to Students

The Math Myth persuasively debunks assertions about the practical value of requiring all students to master high-level math. Hacker makes a strong case that America’s uncritical demand for advanced math does a disservice to students and institutions alike. For instance, the majority of college students will never need to understand quadratic equations for their future jobs or even to obtain a high-level college degree, so why are they asked to spend inordinate amounts of time studying that subject?

Hacker also says there appears to be an overemphasis on math at top-tier colleges as well. Hacker notes the top-ranked universities in the country—Harvard, Princeton, and Yale—want near-perfect SAT math scores among three-quarters of the students they admit. Dartmouth, Duke, and Stanford have only slightly less-rigorous entrance requirements, demanding a score of at least 680.

By making exceptionally high math skills an essential standard by which to measure applicants, Hacker says the nation’s top colleges are missing out on other brilliant students who excel in other academic disciplines.

Hacker writes, “Students who show promise in art history or post-modern criticism won’t even have their applications opened if they faltered in geometry.”

Have U.S. educators been discouraging people who would have made good doctors, lawyers, or even welders by making them prove themselves to be experts at irrelevant math tasks?

The National Merit Scholar program is largely dependent on math skills, giving little weight to talent in the arts, sociology, or political science, Hacker notes.

Once a high school student is accepted into college, he or she is often required to take at least three years of mathematics, including those students with majors in fields that have little or nothing to do with science or math.

Hacker explains contrary to educators’ drive to educate more students in STEM, there is a significant lack of jobs in these areas. He also says these so-called STEM jobs often require considerably less math training than is commonly believed to be necessary.

With all the emphasis on advanced mathematics, education experts overlook the importance of arithmetic, Hacker explains. What current and prospective employees lack, he says, “is not yet calculus or college algebra, but a plethora of more basic quantitative skills that could be taught in high school, but are not.”

‘Not a Solution’

Hacker’s book is by no means anti-math. He himself is a competent math teacher. His goal is only to draw attention to the overemphasis on a small set of academic disciplines and skills, often at the expense of other, more important ones. Time and effort that might have been devoted to nurturing numerical agility has been given over to asymptotes, rational exponents, and other esoteric topics that only those who choose to major in mathematics in college will ever encounter again.

“This nation has no shortage of problems,” writes Hacker. “But demanding more mathematics of everyone is not a solution. That said, sharpening our numeric skills could help.”

Hacker concludes that while the study of basic mathematics is valuable, the idea high-level math and intense instruction in the STEM fields is needed and beneficial for all students—a concept widely accepted and practiced in the United States—is simply a myth.

Jay Lehr, Ph.D. (jlehr@heartland.org) is science director at The Heartland Institute. Dick Geyer, a retired Naval officer and former advertising executive, served on the Las Vegas county citizen police review board and helped facilitate the redevelopment of the city’s declining center.
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