Jindal Proposes Vouchers, Changes in Tenure, Other Education Reforms

By Joy Pullmann

Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal has outlined long-promised education reform proposals, including the largest voucher program in the nation, altering teacher tenure and pay, a Parent Trigger, and giving principals authority to hire, evaluate, and fire. Enacting his proposals would make approximately 400,000 students eligible for state vouchers.

“The way forward is to provide more choices to families, reward teachers, and give school leaders more flexibility with fund-

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Calif. Parents Pull Trigger on School

By Ben Boychuk

Parents of students at a failing elementary school in the Southern California desert city of Adelanto are the second group to exercise their rights under the state’s Parent Trigger law.

Members of the Desert Trails Elementary parent union say if the Adelanto Elementary School District refuses to make certain changes, they intend to convert the school to an independent charter.

“Either [district officials] work with us, or they let us turn it into a community charter school,” said Doreen Diaz, a parent and lead organizer with the Desert Trails Parent Union.

Parents say they have tried to work
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States Worry Over NCLB Waiver Cost

By Ashley Bateman

As the February deadline approached for states to submit No Child Left Behind waiver applications to the U.S. Department of Education, some states decided to reject the offer or delay their applications, citing the expense of waiver requirements.

“The DOE announced in September 2011 it would waive some of the law’s requirements for states adopting policies the Obama administration prefers. The federal NCLB law grants the DOE waiver authority, although not the authority to require the adoption of certain policies as a quid pro quo.

“We view the entire ‘waiver’ discussion as a replacement option for existing law,” said Dennis Parman, Montana’s deputy schools superintendent. “There certainly are states that are in a better position to seek a waiver because they have elements already under way or are in a place that would make transitioning a reasonable lift. Montana is not one of those states.”

Initially, 39 states and DC said they would request waivers. Eleven have done so.

To receive a waiver, the DOE stipulated, states must adopt Common Core State Standards and focus improvement efforts on 15 percent of their lowest-performing schools. States also would be obliged to create teacher- and principal-evaluation systems.

Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina education officials have spoken positively about aspects of the waivers, saying allowing more state control would improve upon current education systems and regulations.

Billions to Implement Requirements

A fiscal analysis by the California State Board of Education in January concluded the cost of funding programs the waiver required would run between $2.4 billion and $3.1 billion for the state, which would “likely exceed net savings from waived SES and choice requirements.”

Montana decided to oppose the waivers and ignore NCLB sanctions. State officials said the waivers’ cost and mandates would harm Montana’s education system.

“There are no additional funds from the department to implement the waiver, and no guarantee that when ESEA [the Elementary and Secondary Education Act] is reauthorized it will include all of the requirements of the waiver,” Parman said. “Most Montana schools know what works for their students and communities. We don’t want to engage in reform for the sake of reform when we see no evidence it will improve the quality of education already being provided to Montana students.”

California State Superintendent Tom Torlakson sent a letter to U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan in August, voicing unease over the stipulations and expense a waiver would entail.

Some States Undecided

Montana, Nebraska, Wyoming, and California are among the states expressing concern over NCLB waivers.

In Nebraska, education officials recently spent money to create and implement state accountability programs that do not meet waiver criteria. California education officials said waivers are not financially feasible.

“The state is in a financial crisis and has had $18 billion cut in the last four fiscal years,” said Tina Jung, information officer for California’s superintendent.

California’s board of education has so far declined to apply for a waiver, instead proposing a possible timeline for the state to apply for a future waiver, reliant on increased financial stability.

Questionable Waiver Authority

Reauthorizing and reforming NCLB is a long-awaited step for the education system after a decade of criticism, but some disagree with the administration’s use of waivers.

 “[The U.S. education secretary] doesn’t have the authority to waive the law,” said Sally Lovejoy, a chief policy negotiator for the U.S. House during NCLB’s creation and now an American Action Forum analyst. “He’s trying to implement and make the law, which is labor policy, and unconstitutional.”

Lovejoy said she worries Duncan is trying to control states through the waiver process.

Advocating ‘True Flexibility’

Montana officials are working toward education reform without a waiver.

“We are engaged in several reform efforts at the state level now, but we do it with our public education partners: teachers, administrators, and school boards,” Parman said. “We will continue to advocate for true flexibility that fits the rural nature of our state. We continue to see laws being made by Congress intended to meet the needs of students in metropolitan areas, and we have many small towns of only 200 people.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
South Dakota Governor Proposes Teacher Bonuses, Ending Tenure

By Sally Nelson

Gov. Dennis Daugaard opened South Dakota’s legislative session by proposing to eliminate tenure for new teachers and to award $15 million in bonuses to the state’s best teachers and those teaching math and science.

With House Bill 1234, the Committee on Education introduced his proposal in January to the House of Representatives for discussion.

Daugaard, a Republican, says he hopes to improve education in South Dakota by rewarding the best teachers and attracting more talented young adults to hard-to-fill math and science positions.

“We cannot simply pour more money into the same old system. Rather, we must focus on improving results, and spend creatively and strategically to achieve those results. The key to high achievement is great teaching, and we will invest the dollars it will take to make a difference,” Daugaard said in his State of the State speech.

The proposal includes $3,500 bonuses for math and science teachers, $5,000 bonuses for the top 20 percent of each district’s teachers, annual teacher evaluations, biannual evaluations for principals, and phasing out tenure for new teachers.

In his address, Daugaard said South Dakota is spending more money than ever on its education system but student test scores aren’t improving.

In the past 40 years, South Dakota’s per-student spending has increased 230 percent and the number of staff per student nearly doubled. Though the number of students in public schools has decreased 28 percent, the number of teachers has increased 10 percent. Student test scores have changed little since 1971.

“A sizeable increase in our investment in education, over time, is not getting us better achievement. We are simply putting more money into the same system, and we are not getting significantly better results,” Daugaard said. “The key to obtaining high achievement in the classroom is not more spending. It is effective teachers.’

State Rep. Jacqueline Sly (R-Rapid City) said the South Dakota legislature is discussing how to implement the governor’s proposals.

“We’ve just seen the actual bill for the first time. We will be looking at that to see where discussion should go from here,” Sly said.

Democrat, Union Opposition

Even before the bill reached the House, Daugaard’s proposal faced opposition from teacher unions and the state’s Democratic Party, whose Web site derided the proposal as an attack upon teachers.

State Rep. Jim Bolin (R-Canton), a retired teacher, says he opposes the bill for different reasons.

“I oppose the bill because, in South Dakota, we have a strong history of local control about teacher evaluation and teacher hiring,” Bolin said. “I’m a proponent of local control.”

Individual districts, he says, should have the ability to evaluate and reward schools as they choose.

In addition to opposing the loss in local control, Bolin says he disagrees with increasing state education spending.

“It would require a $15 to $17 million continual obligation from the state expressly for schools,” he said.

Sally Nelson (sallynelson7@gmail.com) writes from Hillsdale, Michigan.
By Jim Waters
State Rep. Jack Harper (R-Surprise) has proposed legislation that would amend Arizona’s constitution to allow state-funded vouchers for disabled and foster children.

“I believe [a voucher] breaks down the barriers to competition and sharpens the focus of public schools to want to do a good job for every child,” he said.

In 2009, the Arizona Supreme Court struck down two voucher programs because the state constitution’s Blaine Amendment prohibits sending public monies to religious schools. Arizona legislators then approved education savings accounts for disabled children to accomplish similar ends without violating the constitution.

Harper’s plan would allow state-funded, $5,500 vouchers to pay private school tuition for qualified students in any school where average class sizes exceed 35.

First Flight for Arizona ESAs
Analysts from school choice legal heavyweights the Goldwater Institute and Institute for Justice say they would like to see Arizona’s ESAs—the first in the nation—given a chance to withstand current court challenges before trying a constitutional amendment.

“[ESA] is the next generation of education reform,” said Jonathan Butcher, the Goldwater Institute’s education director.

Signed into law in April 2011, SB 1553 created Empowerment Scholarship Accounts, which provide an average of $13,000 in public funds per special-needs student. Funding amounts range from $3,500 for mildly disabled students to more than $25,000 for those with serious disabilities.

Seventy-five students joined the program in fall 2011. Another 72 requested applications in December. There are currently 125,000 special-needs students in the state, a population requiring immediate attention, Butcher said.

“Public schools have for generations tried the one-size-fits-all approach, trying to be all things to all children,” Butcher said. “But there are a host of different needs when you put highly functioning, bright autistic children in a class with students that have a different diagnosis.”

‘The Key’: Education Debit Cards
In Cain v. Horne, the Arizona Supreme Court laid down guidelines for future attempts at school choice. It ruled requiring a parent to sign over a lump sum to a private school was unconstitutional.

ESAs avoid that problem because parents “receive a debit card which they can use on a wide array of educational options,” said Tim Keller, executive director of the Institute for Justice’s Arizona chapter. “That was the key—parents previously had no choice but to use those funds for a private-school education. The ESA program permits tutoring, occupational speech help, homeschooling, and the ability to purchase curriculum and other educational materials.”

Payments are awarded quarterly. Parents must submit receipts to the state’s education department before receiving the next quarter’s payments.

‘Good Chance for Reasonable Ruling’
The ink was barely dry on the bill before the state’s teacher union filed suit to halt it. Keller is optimistic the state’s high court will declare ESAs constitutional.

The state and the Goldwater Institute joined him in arguing for the program before Phoenix’s Maricopa Circuit Court. He says he expects the case to move rapidly to the state supreme court now that the Maricopa judge ruled in his party’s favor and opponents promised to appeal.

“There’s a very good chance for a reasonable ruling from the supreme court,” Keller said. “While [Harper’s] intentions are admirable, right now we need to let the current court case play out. If education savings accounts are upheld, it would offer a very robust program of school choice that could eventually be made available to all students.”

ESAs Spread
Butcher agrees, noting in addition to special-needs students, 94,000 children currently attend “D-rated” schools in Arizona.

“Vouchers have been considered the Holy Grail for school choice in the past, but that isn’t necessarily the case anymore,” Butcher said.

Other states are expressing interest in ESAs, including Florida, which has been working on language for new legislation after opponents stopped a similar bill in early 2011.

Blaine amendments—nineteenth-century limits rooted in anti-Catholic bias—should not hinder school choice supporters in other states, Butcher said.

 “[A Blaine Amendment] certainly hasn’t stopped Arizona and Florida from posing bills and getting them passed,” he said. “Hopefully, what we’ve done and are doing in Arizona will have its effect nationwide.”

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Jindal Proposes Vouchers, Other Education Reforms

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ing and personnel,” Jindal, a Republican, said in announcing his proposals. “Our kids only grow up once, and we cannot wait for the system to reform itself.”

The governor stressed three “pillars” of education: effective teachers, equal opportunity for families, and school flexibility.

He pointed to Louisiana’s low ranking on myriad measures of academic performance in calling for “faster” change. Louisiana students score in the bottom five states on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in every grade and subject tested.

“You have to wait until actual bills have been written and filed, but I think it’s fair to describe it as an ambitious education reform agenda,” said Kevin Kane, president of the New Orleans-based Pelican Institute for Public Policy.

Expanding Choice

A school voucher program currently benefits low-income New Orleans families. Jindal would expand it to every child attending a school rated C or lower by the state whose family is at or below 250 percent of the federal poverty line ($55,876 per year or less for a family of four). That’s more than half of Louisiana’s nearly 700,000 K-12 students.

“The current system is unacceptable and unfair,” Jindal said. “Parents and kids should not be trapped in a failing school because of their ZIP code, income, gender, or color.”

Jindal’s plan also would allow students to take classes from varied providers, including virtual schools, colleges and universities, and businesses with training programs. He’d give high school students who graduate early half of their per-pupil state spending as a college scholarship. He also would extend charter school authorization authority to approved nonprofits, universities, and community organizations.

Attracting, Retaining Teachers

“Our system today often crushes talented teachers, and it makes their jobs harder, not easier,” Jindal said. “If any actual business was set up like this, they would go under in a matter of months. That’s about to happen to our education system.”

To address these problems, Jindal proposes several changes, including removing teacher salary schedules, ending “last in, first out” policies, moving teachers rated ineffective from tenured to probationary, and tying teacher certification to effectiveness. New teachers would receive tenure only after five years of a “highly effective” rating.

“The status quo is going to say my plan hurts teachers and hurts public education,” Jindal said. “They are going to do whatever it takes to say reform is a bad idea. That type of rhetoric is insulting to the people across this state demanding better schools. Teaching is not only one of the most important professions in the world; it’s also one of the toughest professions. That’s why we want to reward teachers.”

Legislative Debates Ahead

Effective reform requires two components, Kane said: Removing obstacles to school success, and giving parents more options for their children to attend a better-fitting school.

He said Jindal’s ideas will have strong support in Louisiana’s legislature, given its “appetite for reform” and a weaker array of opponents such as teacher unions. Jindal’s landslide 2011 reelection with 65 percent of the vote gives his priorities heft, with Republican majorities in both statehouses.

Kane cautioned, however, “Any time you’re talking about changing things, that means there are entrenched interests to oppose that change, and there’s hard work involved.”

Should such an expansive voucher program become reality, Louisiana’s strong history of Catholic parochial schools and their recent enrollment decline means private schools are relatively well-positioned to absorb more students, Kane said.

“Jindal is pretty careful. He has put a lot of time and effort into this, and he’s got a lot of smart people working with him,” Kane said. “This has been a carefully thought-out process. It’ll certainly make the next few months pretty interesting.”

Joy Pullmann ([pullmann@heartland.org]) is managing editor of School Reform News and a research fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute.
W. Va. Schools Audit Prompts Governor’s Reform Call

By Jim Waters

A n audit of West Virginia K-12 schools revealed lagging student performance despite high spending and an overregulated, bureaucratic system with limited voter accountability, prompting Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin (D) to call for change in his State of the State address.

The five-part, $750,000 audit offered more than 50 findings and recommendations for improving the state’s education system.

Small Items Add Up

Auditors were charged with finding out how the state could save money while improving education quality. West Virginia spent $3.5 billion on education during the 2010 budget year. The auditors offered several measures to reorganize the system and stated these could save the state $90 million annually.

“Most of the efficiencies we recommend are relatively small items, but together add up to a significant amount of money,” said Eric Schnurer, president of Public Works LLC, the Pennsylvania-based group that conducted the audit.

Money-saving recommendations include slimming the state’s Department of Education and bringing pay more in line with the private sector, reducing the number of school cooks and their contract length to school days only, stopping double-paying bus drivers for extra routes during work hours, tying the contract length to school days only, reducing the number of school cooks and more in line with the private sector, slimming the state’s Department of Education and bringing pay increases together with increased efficiency by cutting more than $230 million from their central office since 2006 and attracting math and science teachers by offering them a housing subsidy.

Embracing Online Education

The report—and its critics—noted West Virginia’s great divide between rural and urban areas.

That divide is “not really an excuse anymore now that we have more areas being connected,” said Steve Allen Adams, who covers state legislative activity for West Virginia Watchdog.

The report’s largest section focused on making West Virginia “a leader” in online education and education technology. It suggested, among other things:

• replacing textbooks with digital content and requiring districts to “spend 50 percent of their textbook budget on online content within two years—and 100 percent within a decade.”
• letting students “take as many online courses as they want,” and
• increasing teacher technology training and support staff.

Schnurer pointed to research showing digital learning causes students to learn more overall and increases their economic opportunities.

“It’s not a substitute for educating students as we have known, but it’s a way to dramatically improve it,” he said.

Schnurer said he hopes the audit also would lead to improvements in moving graduates seamlessly into the workforce—a theme the governor seized upon during his recent State of the State speech.

Governor: Let’s Move Ahead

Tomblin made the audit results a centerpiece of his speech, saying although goals the audit set forth cannot be achieved “overnight,” he would move toward them with legislation to expand a pilot teacher-performance program.

“I believe it can help make our good teachers great and identify a teacher who needs our help to be better,” Tomblin said.

Adams called the proposal “a pretty bold thing, considering the environment,” but he indicated the legislation is “not quite as stringent as what some would like.” Still, he said, it’s “a good first step.”

The governor also suggested legislation to establish a pilot program giving local administrators greater flexibility in attracting and hiring good teachers in struggling schools.

Jim Waters (jwaters@freedomkentucky.com) is vice president of policy and communications at the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

Indiana Vouchers Constitutional, Judge Rules

A federal judge has ruled the nation’s largest school voucher program constitutional, rejecting every legal claim brought against it, including the argument it represents state funding of religion.

Judge Michael Keele ruled in Meredith v. Daniels that Indiana’s School Choice Scholarship program doesn’t unconstitutionally fund religion because it doesn’t directly fund parochial schools. Instead, it gives vouchers to parents, who then choose where to take them.

“Today’s ruling is a resounding win for Indiana parents and students, and a major defeat for school choice opponents,” said Bert Gall, an Institute for Justice attorney representing two voucher recipient families. “The court’s well-reasoned decision makes clear that the Choice Scholarship program is constitutional and that the teachers’ unions’ lawsuit against it is meritless.”

Indiana State Teachers Association President Nate Schnellenberger said the opponents will appeal.

In August 2011, a judge refused to temporarily halt the program. Approximately 4,000 students are currently participating.

“Thanks to today’s ruling, 1 and thousands of other parents across the state of Indiana can continue to choose schools for our children that best suit their educational needs,” said Heather Coffy, a defendant in the suit whose three children have received choice scholarships.

— Staff Reports
California Parents Pull Trigger on Elementary School

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with school and district officials to improve the school, only to be rebuffed. They want the right to select the school’s principal and empower the principal to hire and assign staff, control the school’s budget, and change curriculum as necessary.

All of those changes would require the Adelanto District Teachers’ Association to waive its current collective bargaining agreement.

Large Majority Sign
About 100 parents rallied on January 12 at a park adjacent to the school before delivering several thick binders full of petitions in a red Radio Flyer wagon to Desert Trails Principal David Mobley.

Mobley, who had been on the job for only three months, said he believed parents, teachers, and district officials were “all working toward the same ends.” But he said he worried the Parent Trigger could divert limited resources from schools to litigation.

“We should be spending money improving education for kids, not tying things up in court,” Mobley said.

About 70 percent of parents at the school signed the petition, parent union organizers said. Under state regulations that took effect last fall, school district officials had until February 21 to verify or reject the parents’ petition.

School’s Record of Failure
Under California’s Parent Trigger law, if at least half of the eligible parents at a persistently failing school sign a petition, the local education authority must do one of the following: Shut down the school and allow students to enroll in higher-performing public schools nearby; restart the school as an independent charter; or implement the “turnaround,” “transformation,” or “alternative governance” models set forth by state law and federal Race to the Top regulations.

Desert Trails, which serves about 650 students in kindergarten through sixth grade, has failed to meet state standards for six years. The school ranks among the worst-performing elementary schools in San Bernardino County and is in the bottom 10 percent of schools in the state, according to the California Department of Education.

The school’s Academic Performance Index score for the 2010–11 school year was 706. An API ranking of 799 or lower is considered failing. Just 34 percent of Desert Trails students are proficient in reading, and 46 percent are proficient in math, state statistics show.

“Either [district officials] work with us, or they let us turn it into a community charter school.”

MORNING DIARY

DOREEN DIAZ
DESERT TRAILS PARENT UNION

District Resisted Change
The Desert Trails petition could become the first successful test of California’s 2010 Parent Empowerment Act. The first effort, by parents at an elementary school in Compton, failed last year when a Los Angeles Superior Court judge ruled the parents’ petitions did not comply with state law.

Parent Revolution, a Los Angeles-based school reform organization, helped win passage of the state Parent Trigger law and helped organize parents in Compton and Adelanto.

Gabe Rose, the group’s assistant executive director, said the Adelanto parents are successfully leveraging the trigger to “force the district to the bargaining table.”

“The parents weren’t getting anywhere with the district until they collected these signatures,” explained Rose, suggesting the parents could withdraw the petition if district officials and the local teacher union make concessions.

“The union can waive the contract, or the school will become a community charter. Either way, the parents win,” Rose said.

District Rejected Demands
In letters to the school district and at the January rally, parents detailed allegations of bullying, poorly maintained facilities, and teacher indifference.

“The goal of a great school for our children is primary,” Diaz wrote to Adelanto Superintendent Darin Brawley in December. “The preference to keep the school within the District and teachers covered by the contract is secondary.”

Holly Odenbaugh, a Desert Trails parent whose daughter attends kindergarten, said she learned how bad the situation was at the school on the first day of classes this fall. “The teacher told me it wasn’t worth it for her to come to school anymore,” Odenbaugh recalled.

Odenbaugh was among a dozen parents who met on November 21 with Adelanto Assistant Superintendent Ross Swearingen, where they presented a lengthy list of demands for reform.

“We respectfully decline to meet all of the demands as they were presented,” Swearingen wrote in a December letter.

“While we are confident that many of the demands are already in place at the school and others will be implemented, … some are not possible without causing harm to other schools in the district.”

Other Organizations Forming
Parents launched their petition drive after receiving the district’s response.

The Desert Trails Parent Union is one of several such groups to organize since last summer, according to Parent Revolution spokeswoman Linda Serrato. Around 10 such unions have formed and registered as nonprofit organizations with California’s Secretary of State.

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INTERNET INFO

House Republicans have released draft language for the last two of five bills to rewrite and reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, currently known as No Child Left Behind.

Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman John Kline (R-MN) says he will sponsor the Student Success Act, which makes several significant changes to the federal role in K-12 education. These include eliminating the adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirement (while retaining requirements for states to disaggregate student achievement data by subgroups such as minorities); the “basic,” “proficient,” and “advanced” designations for federally required state tests; the requirement for states to test students in science; and the “highly qualified teacher” mandate.

“The Student Success Act gets a lot right in fixing what’s wrong with the current federal role in education,” said Michael Petrilli, vice president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. “It appropriately acknowledges that states need to be in the driver’s seat when it comes to academic accountability. It allows for a great deal of flexibility at the local level, especially on setting spending priorities. And it gets rid of the charade that is the ‘highly qualified teachers’ mandate.

“But it errs on one important count,” he continued. “It removes the requirement that states test students in science. At a time when the federal role should be focused on creating more transparency around results, it makes no sense to stop collecting and reporting data about student performance in this critical subject.”

The committee has been working on a piecemeal rewrite of NCLB since spring 2011. The Student Success Act, along with the Encouraging Innovation and Effective Teachers Act, for which draft language also was introduced in January, complete the several bills House Republicans plan to offer for reauthorizing the law.

Revising Accountability Provisions

The “accountability” rewrite of provisions such as AYP and highly qualified teachers has been long anticipated. AYP was widely despised as an artificial and unrealistic set of requirements leading toward 100 percent student proficiency by 2014 or risking federal sanctions. The proposal eliminates AYP but still requires states to implement statewide accountability systems and identify public school performance.

NCLB’s highly qualified teacher provision requires teachers hold at least a bachelor’s degree and state certification to teach a core subject. The committee proposal eliminates this requirement entirely.

“It also eliminates School Improvement Grants that prescribe turnaround models for low-performing schools, and it provides funding flexibility for states’ Title I programs.”

“The Student Success Act is an improvement over No Child, but it begs the question: Why is Washington involved in education at all?” asked Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom. “For almost 50 years—not just under NCLB—Washington has been heavily involved in schooling, ultimately producing no discernible achievement gains. But this bill keeps Washington firmly involved even if its grip would slacken a bit.”

Lindsey M. Burke (lindsey.burke@heritage.org) is an education policy analyst at The Heritage Foundation.
A proposed ballot initiative would give California high school students, regardless of where they live, the right to access classes required for admission to state universities.

The Student Bill of Rights initiative removes state barriers to online and blended learning, which could expand drastically if the measure passes.

A 2009 University of California study generated the initiative by revealing nearly half of California's 2007 high school class received diplomas without meeting basic admission requirements for two major state-funded universities, the University of California and California State University.

"Parents are realizing that the best education their kids can get is not necessarily the closest to them," said Education Forward Chair David Haglund, whose organization is sponsoring the initiative.

State regulations severely curtail the classes students can take offsite—whether offered online, at a community college, or in another school district, he noted.

**Lack of Access**
The college admission standards, called A-G requirements, are fairly simple: two years of qualifying classes in history or social science, four years of English, three years of math, two years of lab science, two years of a non-English language, one year of visual or performing arts, and one year of college preparatory electives.

But rural or inner-city schools often lack qualified teachers or too many students need remedial classes, Haglund said. One million students are enrolled in schools that don’t offer the courses necessary to gain UC or CSU admission, according to Education Forward.

Although some students can enroll in online classes, they’re limited to programs located in their district, county, or a contiguous county.

**Expanding Options**
Under the new regulations, students and districts would have several options to access the required courses:

- The school or district can contract with an online provider to offer their own online program.
- The student can take classes at any classroom-based, blended learning, or online program at any other publicly funded school, college, or university.
- The student can enroll in a blended learning or online course offered by an accredited online school “in which the student, instructor and resources are in different locations and interact through the use of information and communications technologies.”

The initiative also would establish the “California diploma,” which would require students to pass all A-G classes to graduate.

Expanding online learning will offer students the ability to learn at their own pace, said Michael Horn, executive director of education at the Innosight Institute. Traditional classroom education can leave “holes in your learning,” he said, but with online education, “I’ll only move on when I’ve truly mastered the concept.”

Advanced students would be able to enroll in advanced placement or college classes, said Bill Lucia, president of Edvoice, an advocacy organization in Sacramento. Lucia’s five children are currently enrolled in an online learning program. He said he has seen it work firsthand.

**Reworking School Funding**
Although similar proposals have been presented in the legislature in past years, they’ve met opposition because expanding student access to courses outside their district would require “substantial reworking” of the educational finance system, Horn said. The current proposal would remedy that.

California determines a school’s funding based on Average Daily Attendance, or the number of days students spend at their physical school. Under the proposed initiative, funding will follow the student. If a student takes 25 percent of her courses online, and 75 percent at her public school, then the student’s funding will divide between them accordingly.

“If districts are providing 100 percent of the education, they should get 100 percent of the [funds],” Haglund said. “But if they’re not providing 100 percent of the education, should they keep 100 percent of the funding?”

Haglund said he hopes the fractional funding model will open the door for appropriating funding to separate programs with proven student learning outcomes.

“Once we pull the issue and put it in the people’s hands, the legislature will be more responsive to the issue,” he said.

For the initiative to qualify for the November 7 ballot, Education Forward must collect 504,760 signatures of registered voters by June 1.

**Ariz. Judge Rules Voucher Plan Constitutional**

An Arizona judge has refused to block education savings accounts for disabled and foster children in the state, removing one more hurdle to school choice for the state’s one million schoolchildren.

“The exercise of parental choice among education options makes the program constitutional,” ruled Maricopa County Superior Court Judge Maria del Mar Verdin. “The monies are earmarked for a student’s educational needs as a parent may deem fit—not endorsed directly to a private institution in an all or nothing fashion.”

A lawsuit by the state’s teacher union and other groups requested a preliminary injunction to stop the program, arguing it violated a state constitutional provision against sending state aid directly to private schools. They have promised an appeal.

“The program gives parents a full menu of educational options on which to spend the funds,” noted Tim Keller, executive director of the Institute for Justice Arizona, which represented parents in the case. “In that way, it is abundantly clear the program aids individuals, not institutions.”

The program, first of its kind in the nation, lets parents apply for an Arizona Empowerment Account and use funds the state deposits into it for a wide variety of educational expenses, including tutoring, private tuition, textbooks, and college.

— Staff Reports
Arizona already has an individual tuition tax credit, a similar corporate tax credit, and the nation’s first education savings accounts (ESAs), which allow parents to divide their child’s state education dollars among approved providers. “The goal is to help get students off of waiting lists and serve more students,” Butcher said.

Targeting ‘Switchers’
The current tax credit allows individuals to receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit up to $500 (or $1,000 for a couple) for contributions they make to scholarship-granting organizations. Children then use these scholarships to attend a private school of their family’s choice. Murphy would double the amount of the tax credit a family could receive, by allowing couples to receive a tax credit for donating up to $2,000. The extra $1,000 has limits, though: The scholarship organizations that receive the money must direct it to a student moving from public to private school. “The expansion is a new way to help ‘switchers’—students moving from traditional public schools to private schools,” Butcher said.

This saves the state money because $2,000 in lost taxes is still a little less than half of Arizona’s per-pupil public school allotment. In addition to saving the state money, an education tax credit for individuals and not only scholarship donations essentially “allows a family to keep more of their hard-earned money to use on education for their children,” noted Will Estrada, director of federal relations at the Home School Legal Defense Association.

Although Murphy’s plan is limited to donations for private school tuition, “State tax credit legislation should be written to apply to all families, whether the children attend a public, private, or homeschool,” Estrada said. “When parents are able to make the educational decisions for their children—and receive a tax credit while doing so—families and children benefit.”

Demand Spurs Excellence
The likely reason demand for school choice in Arizona is outpacing supply is that school choice provides families with better education opportunities, said Lance Izumi, education studies director at the Pacific Research Institute. “The most rigorous research evidence overwhelmingly shows that increased school choice opportunities improve the quality of students’ education and their achievement,” he said. “Expanding choice options should be a chief goal of policymakers, in Arizona or in any other state, and celebrated when it is achieved.”

Rachel Sheffield (rachel.sheffield@heritage.org) is an education research assistant at The Heritage Foundation.
School Choice Proposition on Texas Primary Ballot

By Caleb Whitmer

Texas’s spring 2012 primary ballot will include a proposition asking Republican voters if the state should fund K-12 education by attaching money directly to each student, rather than school districts or agencies.

The State Republican Executive Committee votes in the December before each spring primary on propositions to include on the ballot. They use the propositions to gather support for policy issues facing the legislature; the propositions do not directly affect Texas law.

“I think [the school choice proposition] will pass overwhelmingly, and I think the state of Texas, if it passes, will see more pressure on the legislature to get it done,” said David Bellow, an SREC representative from Senate District 3.

Target: Savings and Freedom

The education proposition, titled “School Choice,” is as follows:

“The state should fund education by allowing dollars to follow the child instead of the bureaucracy, through a program which allows parents the freedom to choose their child’s school, public or private, while also saving significant taxpayer dollars.”

Currently, Texas funds state education primarily through pooled property taxes distributed throughout the school districts. The state also receives education tax money from the federal government and grant organizations, according to the Texas Education Agency’s Web site.

The proposition intentionally does not contain a specific plan for state education funding so the state legislature can work out the details, Bellow said. He said he hopes the proposition will send this main message: “Money should follow the students.”

“I think [the school choice proposition] will pass overwhelmingly, and I think the state of Texas, if it passes, will see more pressure on the legislature to get it done.”

DAVID BELLOW
STATE REPUBLICAN EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
SENATE DISTRICT 3 - TEXAS

Getting ‘Bang for the Buck’

The concern over Texas’s current education funding is how efficiently tax money contributes to a Texas student’s education, said James Golsan, a policy analyst for the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

“We want to make sure we are getting as much bang for our buck as possible,” he said. “The school choice [proposition], we feel, will introduce more competition to schools.”

More competition means a higher level of education for students, Golsan said, because with more competition schools have to focus on attracting students through increased excellence to earn their funding.

Choice and Charter Schools

Students should be able to attend whatever school best fits their learning needs, Bellow said. Not tying funds to individual children means Texas charter schools currently receive less state education funds than traditional schools, he notes.

More than 130,000 students are enrolled in 482 Texas charter campuses, according to the Texas Charter Schools Association. Slightly fewer than 5 million students are enrolled in 8,435 Texas public schools.

The number of Texas charter schools is currently capped at 215. Once a school is established, however, it may create other campuses. The cap has hampered Texas’s charter school growth, said Josie Duckett, a TCSA spokeswoman.

The Texas legislature meets every other year, so it will not discuss school funding or charter limits until 2013.

“Hopefully, next session things will be different in Texas,” Duckett said.

Caleb Whitmer (cwhitmer92@gmail.com) writes from Hillsdale, Michigan.

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Colorado Teacher Unions Get Millions from Taxpayers

By Sally Nelson

Teacher unions in 20 Colorado school districts have spent more than $5.8 million in taxpayer dollars on union activities in the past five years, from union presidents’ salaries to paid teacher days off.

Collective bargaining agreements between unions and school districts compelled tax funding beyond the dues collected from teacher payrolls.

Colorado closed a $500 million deficit in 2011 and expects to have a similarly sized deficit in 2012.

The Denver Post reviewed budget documents from the largest 20 Colorado school districts, finding direct funding for union activities ranged from $1.3 million in Douglas County School District to zero in Mesa County Valley District. The Post reported its $5.8 million total is a conservative estimate because some districts do not track the costs.

There is no evidence funding union activities with taxpayer dollars boosts student achievement, said Ben DeGrow, senior education analyst for the Colorado-based Independence Institute. Because there is no positive effect on students, he said, the legislature should end these subsidies, especially with schools facing budget cuts.

“It’s time to stop taxpayer-funding of union business,” DeGrow said. “We need to seriously look at legislation that ends the practice.”

Because so little information on taxpayer funding for union activity is available, the legislature should order an audit in order to uncover more specifics, DeGrow said.

Minimal Accountability for Unions

As outlined in collective bargaining agreements, most of these funds pay for union leader salaries and paid release days for teachers—paying teachers for days off to engage in union activity. DeGrow said he has found most of the money is allocated to unions with little oversight.

“Generally speaking—and it varies from district to district—union officers do not have to report to anyone. They are not accountable to the public,” DeGrow said.

In 2010, Colorado legislators debated Senate Bill 91, which proposed changes to teacher tenure. Teachers from Colorado’s two largest school districts, Jefferson and Denver, used taxpayer-funded release days to lobby in the state capitol against the bill.

Taxpayer dollars also fund paid leave for teachers to vote on officers and bylaws at the Colorado Education Association’s organizational meeting in April.

“The union is a self-interested organization focused on benefits for its members,” DeGrow said. “Quite often their benefit doesn’t coincide with the public interest, and the public should not be paying for that.”

‘Districts Agree’ to Pay

State Sen. Bob Bacon (R-Fort Collins), former chair of the state Senate education board, does not agree the money is improperly spent. He says districts choose to spend their money this way and basing decisions on “outside opinion” indicates a narrow, uninformed view of how Colorado schools function.

“The districts agree that it is worth it. Should we take some outside assessment?” Bacon asked. “It isn’t as though they are paying for the union president’s salary so they can do what they want.”

Bacon said cooperation between teacher associations and administrators can help avert expensive legal problems.

“Investment in solving problems saves billions,” he said.

Little Return for Money

Some of the funding pays for union-sponsored teacher training. This kind of training is generally very low-quality, said Hoover Institution Senior Fellow Terry Moe. Unions offer the training mainly because teachers get credits for it and are paid more as a result, he said.

“It’s all about teachers getting paid more. The quality doesn’t make a difference, and the courses don’t amount to much. It’s basically a boondoggle,” Moe said.

The solution, he said, is not to get rid of the training but to improve it. But without accountability, the Colorado unions have no incentives to improve taxpayer-funded training.

“School districts are under more pressure now than ever before to boost achievement,” Moe said. “Good. There are now stronger incentives to boost the quality of education. Unions don’t have those incentives. They want to make sure that nobody ever loses a job and that teachers get paid as much as possible. Unions protect teachers.”

Sally Nelson (sallynelson7@gmail.com) writes from Hillsdale, Michigan.
Missouri Charter Proposals
Stress Quality, Quantity

By Jim Waters

New bills filed in the Missouri legislature would improve the quality and increase accountability of existing charter schools while expanding them beyond St. Louis and Kansas City, the only two areas charters currently are allowed in the state.

Compared with states such as Minnesota and California, Missouri has a small number of students attending charters. But supporters suggest the 20,000 Missouri students enrolled in charters just in those two cities indicate the potential for growth if Senate Bill 576 and House version HB 1228 pass.

“If charter schools can help students in St. Louis and Kansas City, why can’t charter schools help students in Springfield and Columbia?” asked Audrey Spalding, a policy analyst at the Show-Me Institute.

Quality Expansion
Accountability is as important as expanding access and numbers, Spalding said.

“As we saw with the Imagine Schools debacle in 2011, it is critical to have an active and engaged sponsor willing to close failing charter schools,” she said.

Mayor Francis Slay called for six Imagine charter schools in St. Louis to close after the Post-Dispatch published a series of articles showing convoluted real estate deals fueled the schools’ national management company while the firm failed to provide students with textbooks and supplies, holding some classes in hallways. The schools’ performance on state standardized exams was also “worse than any school district in Missouri,” said the report.

Strengthening accountability measures for existing and future charter schools while providing more Missouri parents with access to charters is the right combination, said Earl Simms, communications director for the Missouri Charter Public School Association (MCPSA).

“We seek quality expansion, not just expansion for the sake of expansion,” Simms said.

The legislation “will help families with children trapped in failing schools, who cannot afford to send their children to private schools,” Spalding said. “It’s important to close failing schools, whether they are traditional public schools or charter schools. It does no one any good to keep a school that fails its students open.”

AUDREY SPALDING
POLICY ANALYST
SHOW-ME INSTITUTE

Key Provisions of Missouri SB 576

• Requires charter school sponsors be evaluated every three years using standards endorsed by the State Board of Education.
• Allows private Kansas City universities to sponsor charters, as they already may in St. Louis.
• Makes some nonprofit groups and two-year vocational and technical schools eligible to sponsor charter schools.
• Removes the restriction that colleges and universities have their primary campus in the school district or a county adjacent to the county in which the district is located.
• Increases charter sponsors’ access to closed school district facilities.

Debate Over Omnibus Approach
Some lawmakers say they want to see the charter school provisions included in an omnibus bill with other education issues, including changes to the state’s school funding formula, tax credit scholarship programs, and student-transfer policies. Simms said such an approach would diminish the charter bills’ chances.

“Any time a bill takes on more weight legislatively, it becomes more difficult to pass,” he said. “The provisions in these bills are needed legislation to solve current problems in Missouri’s charter school law that was enacted over a decade ago.”

The charter school legislation is particularly urgent because Missouri fell five spots in the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools’ annual rankings of state charter laws by not passing legislation last session, Simms noted.

“Other states are more rapidly embracing charter schools as a public education option and are moving ahead of Missouri in the sector,” he said.

Jim Waters (jwaters@freedomkentucky.com) is vice president of policy and communications at the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions in Bowling Green, Kentucky.
Apple Unveils Digital Textbook, E-Publishing Platform

By Joy Pullmann

In its first product announcement directly tied to education, Apple Inc. unveiled a free digital textbook and e-book platform, iBooks Author, similar to its GarageBand and iTunes software for music.

Apple says iBooks Author will make creating and distributing e-books much easier while allowing integration of media such as audio, video, games, and interactive quizzes.

“We want to reinvent the textbook,” said Phil Schiller, Apple’s marketing chief. He noted conventional textbooks are not portable, searchable, “current,” or interactive.

Apple will offer textbooks through its online store, beginning with high school textbooks priced as low as $14.99. The firm is partnering with publishing monopolies Pearson, McGraw-Hill, Houghton Mifflin, DK Publishing, and Harcourt, which serve 90 percent of the textbook market.

College ‘Anywhere in the World’

The company is also expanding its iTunesU online university lectures, used by more than 1,000 universities, into complete online courses including syllabi, video lectures, assignments, documents, apps, and message boards. Oxford, Cambridge, Duke, and Yale universities are among those currently developing full courses through iTunesU.

“Never before have educators been able to offer their full courses in such an innovative way, allowing anyone who’s interested in a particular topic to learn from anywhere in the world, not just the classroom,” said Eddy Cue, an Apple senior vice president.

Apple will now allow K-12 schools and providers to offer classes through iTunesU.

“The iTunesU piece is more directed at the student, the informal education space outside school,” said Michael Horn, executive director of education at the Innosight Institute. He noted it enables professors and students to move beyond traditional, four-year degrees into receiving specific credentials or skill certification.

Textbooks Outdated?

Schools already have bought more than 1.5 million iPads, though only approximately 6 percent of textbook sales will be digital in 2012, according to distributor MBS Direct Digital. The company predicted that number will rise to more than 50 percent by 2020.

The announcement signals Apple intends to keep iPads a dominant education technology, Horn said.

“The whole notion of a textbook as a single-curated, flat, and sequential experience is quickly fading,” said Tom Vander Ark, director of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning. “iBooks Author is a terrific tool for building textbooks, but the whole notion of textbooks is quickly going away.”

He pointed to a difference between tablets and computers with keyboards: People use tablets to consume, and personal computers to create.

“Schools will have to [choose] between whether they want to use a consumption or a production device,” he said. “I want to think of it as a student producer. I want them writing 500 words a day and producing media.”

Although the sticker price of traditional college textbooks is high, publishers often don’t bring out new editions for seven or eight years, Horn said. With iPads costing $499 and e-books easier to update, iPad textbooks may not be much cheaper, he said.

“If more self-publishers got into the market, would you get truly cheap or free textbooks using this platform?” he asked. “That’s interesting to see, how that rolls out, and we won’t see it for a few years.”

Educationally ‘A Step Sideways’

In conjunction with iBooks Author and the iTunesU upgrade, Apple also rolled out an updated iBooks iPad app. The new products currently work only on Apple hardware. It’s a clear move to compete with Amazon’s free e-book publishing tools and push into a pre-existing e-textbook market, Horn said.

Apple’s ed-tech success will depend on whether its products create a new market in education instead of merely pitching shinier products to the current market, Horn said.

“You create a new market, and the old comes into the new way of doing things,” he said. “That’s how you win, not by competing head-on.”

As classrooms continue integrating technology and slowly becoming more student-centered, the educational influence of Apple’s move remains to be seen.

“Apple’s media reinforce the teacher-centric approach and the traditional classroom,” Vander Ark said. “Don’t be afraid—this doesn’t change anything. It’s just a book on a tablet, and it doesn’t weigh very much. It feels more like a step sideways than a great advance.”

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is managing editor of School Reform News and a research fellow in education at The Heartland Institute.

Report Offers a Plan for Digitizing Kentucky Education

By Sally Nelson

Creating a digital learning system that provides access for all students could further Kentucky’s goals of equipping students for colleges and careers, says a report presented to the Kentucky Board of Education.

The report considers 10 goals ranging from content quality to funding, to increase equality of student access to quality education. It concludes with recommendations to policymakers for beginning the shift from traditional to digital classrooms.

“Online learning expands access to great teachers and great content,” said Tom Vander Ark, CEO of OpenEd Solutions and a report contributor. “There’s no reason that every student in Kentucky shouldn’t have access to every [Advanced Placement] course, every advanced science course, and all dual enrollment courses.”

Compiled by the Kentucky Department of Education and consulting firm OpenEd Solutions, the report is part of a broad effort to improve Kentucky’s education system. The National Assessment of Educational Progress reported only one of three Kentucky students rates “proficient” or better within their grade level. The writers of the report said they hope their work will encourage reforms that increase educational quality.

Concerns: Access, Quality

The Board of Education’s major concerns were whether students could engage digital opportunities and that learning was well-monitored, said Lisa Gross, communications director for the Kentucky Department of Education.

“The Internet is not present in everyone’s home. There may be free Internet access through libraries or community centers, but many students don’t live close to those,” Gross said.

Vander Ark says access to quality learning for all students is not out of reach, since all Kentucky schools have Internet access.

“It’s quite possible now to create a learning playlist that’s cached on a laptop hard drive,” he noted. “Even with a house without Internet access, students would still have access to great learning content.”

Lower Long-Term Costs

Board members raised concerns digital learning would increase costs. But the report stated digital learning lowers long-term costs after the initial investment.

Vander Ark said a Kentucky high school could offer two AP courses at approximately $2,000 per student in 25-person classes. Digitally, that same high school could offer 32 AP courses at $700 a student.

“You have to stop buying books and start buying laptops,” Vander Ark said.

Sally Nelson (sallynelson7@gmail.com) writes from Hillsdale, Michigan.
Culture Contributes to Military Children’s Strong Scores

By Ashley Bateman

The 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress confirmed a strong trend: Soldiers’ children outperform public school students in reading and math.

The U.S. military runs K-12 schools for service members’ children on bases, ports, posts, and military installations around the world. NAEP for years has reported higher average scores among Department of Defense Dependents Schools students than their public school peers.

Elaine Kanellis, deputy communications chief for the schools’ umbrella agency, theorizes the military culture, more than curriculum, determines the difference.

“The military places a very high priority on education—to make it to the next rank or to advance, you have to have your education checked,” Kanellis said. “So that importance of school is there and that parental involvement is there because parents know the importance of education. The school is a focal point of the military community.”

The NAEP assesses schools every two years, most recently in 2011. About 100 DoDDS participated in the fourth-grade assessment and 50 schools in the eighth-grade tests.

In fourth-grade math, the average score for DoDDS students was 241, while the national average was 240. Reading scores, however, were markedly higher. In reading, 39 percent of fourth graders at DoDDS received proficient scores—seven percentage points higher than public school students and better than 45 states. Only one state performed significantly higher.

Strong Parental Involvement

“With the base schools, there is perhaps more parental involvement than you find in many other schools,” said Arnold Goldstein, director for design, analysis, and reporting at the National Center for Education Statistics.

Military communities often function separately from the surrounding locale, with their own set of police and schools, and a post or base commander serving as “mayor.” When a child is struggling in school, the commander can require a parent-teacher conference to address the issue.

“Our new post commander really came out and said school education is number one—if you have a child conference, that is your place of duty for the day,” said Nicole McAllister, a first-grade teacher at Warner Barracks in Bamberg, Germany. “That really empowered the school to be an advocate for the children. The idea that we’re going to collaborate as an entire family is not feasible in civilian schools. I know exactly where the parent works, and I can reach out and touch that family.”

Class size is more regulated in DoDDS than in public schools. A new rule requires one teacher for every 18 kindergarten students.

“That was huge because when you’re dealing with them in that first year, you’re really able to touch each student and assess,” McAllister said.

Slimmer Minority Achievement Gaps

“It’s a mix of the culture, where our kids come from, and the way they learn,” said Steve Schrankel, the schools’ accountability chief. “It’s the curriculum and teachers of our students, [and] it’s the values that parents put behind any educational effort we try to bring forward.”

STEVE SCHRANKEL
ACCOUNTABILITY CHIEF
DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE DEPENDENTS SCHOOLS

“It’s a mix of the culture, where our kids come from, and the way they learn. It’s the curriculum and teachers of our students, [and] it’s the values that parents put behind any educational effort we try to bring forward. Our minority students contribute to this overall good picture.”

In contrast to many American school districts, the achievement gap between races is decreasing at DoDDS. In reading on NAEP, black fourth graders at military base schools scored 11 points below whites, a significant decrease from 2003’s gap of 16 points. Nationally, the gap is 26 points.

“With that parental involvement across all racial and ethnic groups, that could contribute to the smallness of that gap,” Goldstein said.

Though the divorce rate among military couples recently surpassed the national average, military children still reap the benefits of having at least one parent with a secure job and home and access to health care.

“Coming from New York, you have homeless children and families that are always moving around,” McAllister said. “If a child’s not eating, no matter how fantastic the school is, you’re not going to get anywhere. In the military, we’re kind of in a safety bubble.”

Reduced Federal Mandates

While many public schools factor standardized test preparation into the curriculum, military base schools vary on including it as a focus. Military base schools are not held to the same standards as public schools under No Child Left Behind, so they’re free from federal imposition of curriculum restructuring and improvement plans triggered by low scores on standardized tests.

“We have the TerraNova [standardized test], but it doesn’t go on their record, so the students don’t feel a lot of pressure and the teachers don’t feel a huge amount of pressure,” McAllister said. “All of our curriculum does come with test prep, but I don’t have to worry about the school not getting money if we don’t score so well or not getting accredited.”

An increase in virtual learning also may be contributing to DoDDS student success. In 2011 the department’s Educational Partnership awarded $8.7 million in Virtual Learning Grants.

Deployments and a rising divorce rate may be the main factors in the slowdown of some score improvement, according to McAllister, reinforcing the belief social forces may help drive or undermine achievement. Divorce rates rose steadily in military communities over the past five years but recently stabilized.

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
School Choice Week Gets Big Send-Off in New Orleans

By Rachel Sheffield

Thousands of students, parents, state leaders, and school choice advocates came together in New Orleans for the second National School Choice Week to show their support for education opportunity.

“[Approximately] 2,500 parents all gathered together to support effective education options for parents,” noted Robert Enlow, president and CEO of the Indiana-based Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice. This made for one of the most enthusiastic and energetic school choice gatherings yet.

With marching bands from schools near New Orleans, rallying speeches from state education leaders, and celebrities such as the Temptations, Ellis Marsalis, “Trombone Shorty,” and James Carville, the New Orleans event underscored national momentum for a series of more than 400 events across the nation in celebration of NSCW.

“The purpose of our National School Choice Kickoff in New Orleans ... was to begin a week-long push to inform and educate millions of Americans about the power of school choice and to show them just how necessary change in the current school system is,” explained Brian Nething, NSCW’s outreach director. “We aimed to bring together hundreds of schools and organizations in one place to urge them to celebrate it in their state and demand school choice in states that do not have it.”

More than 30 governors, mayors, and legislators officially recognized School Choice Week this year. Television coverage of school choice increased 492 percent during that week compared with the yearly average.

Choice Thrives in New Orleans

New Orleans is home to a voucher program and robust charter school system. Nearly 70 percent of New Orleans public schools are charters, according to a 2011 RAND Corporation report. Louisiana also provides a voucher program for special-needs students.

“If you live in New Orleans, you live in the heart of the reform movement that is sweeping across this country,” said Chas Roemer, a Louisiana State Board of Education member.

After attending the kickoff, Matthew Barnes, executive director of the Houston-based Families Empowered, mentioned meeting a Louisiana parent who has two children in a district public school and two others in separate charters.

“He was satisfied with each option, loved the choices he had selected, and thought his kids were doing ‘very well,’” Barnes said. “We need more of that.”

Spreading School Choice

Louisiana leaders are committed to providing more. In January, Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal (R) unveiled a plan to reform the state’s education system and expand school choice opportunities for Louisiana families.

His proposal includes making the New Orleans private school voucher program available statewide for students attending “C” grade schools or below—approximately half of all schoolchildren statewide—streamlining the process for charter school approvals, and tax credits for those who contribute to private school scholarships.

In his speech at the kickoff event, Roemer spoke of Louisiana’s continued commitment to expanding school choice.

“We’re going to do something radical in this state. We’re going to allow a parent, when they wake up in the morning, to have a choice of where they send their child to school,” he said. “The most powerful tool we have to change education in this state is choice. And it comes in all forms.”

The New Orleans school choice event enthused participants from around the nation looking to increase education opportunities for students in their own state.

“That event made a powerful statement in support of more educational options for parents,” Barnes remarked. “Coming from Houston, where choice is a relatively new but growing reality, I left more convinced than ever of the value of choice and competition in our educational system.”

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

Student Voice: Why I Support School Choice

By Jason Russell

As a firm believer in the superiority of freedom over coercion, it is evident to me that an educational system in which three-quarters of the students attend schools assigned by their geographic location is flawed.

Every child is different and deserves a school suited to them, regardless of where they live. Without options, there is little safeguard against failing schools. School choice programs allow a wide variety of schools to prosper and serve the needs of students instead of entrenched bureaucrats.

America should be aiming to be the best country in the world in the world in every possible way, and simply being ranked as “average” against the other OECD nations is sorely disappointing. The solutions that have been sought for the last 40 years are ineffective. Since 1970, total expenditures by governments on public schools have more than doubled, ballooning from about $272 billion to $592 billion in 2009 (adjusted for inflation). In spite of that, scores on the Nation’s Report Card have never significantly changed since its first assessment in 1969.

Public schools clearly have sufficient funding. We must seek alternative solutions.

As a student active in politics, I am well aware how long it can take for reform to work through the legislature, go into effect, and then produce results. When I eventually have children, I want their schools to have improved significantly from the state they were in while I was a student, and I want the freedom to choose from numerous schooling options for my child.

It is crucial to me that school choice legislation passes now. For generations to come, increased school choice will benefit all.

Jason Russell (jrussel14@u.rochester.edu) is a junior double-majoring in economics and political science at the University of Rochester.
When I (Cynthia) attended Logan Elementary School in Wilmette, Illinois, we students were sent home for lunch with the understanding our parents would feed and send us back for the afternoon session an hour later. It was every family’s duty to ensure somebody provided lunch every day.

Far more happened than bodily nourishment. Parents offer nourishment for the soul and transmit family values. Family lunches gave us time to process what was happening in school and reinforce the culture and virtues that make great citizens.

Parents were expected to raise their children, and school teachers were expected to educate. As no-fault divorce and cohabitation swept the nation, marriage began a tumble quickly followed by declining student test scores.

Marriage-absence, whether through divorce or a family that failed to form in the first place, is a key structural problem driving education failure today. Too many children lack the parental guidance necessary for school readiness. Statistically, children raised in intact families have social and economic advantages.

Parents’ Absence Burdens Schools
Between 1970 and 2009, poorly designed public policies caused marriage rates to decline by 53 percent nationally, while illegitimacy soared 1,700 percent. Today, 41 percent of the nation’s children are born outside marriage. In poor areas, this percentage is much higher. Children ended up worse off academically, emotionally, spiritually, and mentally.

As parents did less, public schools started doing more. The lines started blurring when social engineers assumed parents were failing and asked schools to gradually assume more child-rearing duties. Most teachers love teaching and are happy to help when called upon, but requiring them to parent half their students before beginning to teach is an impossible task.

When we adopt public policies that build marriage, we will have a winning recipe for improved outcomes for all. Teachers cannot insist that children brush their teeth, do their homework, wash their clothes, and go to bed. Yet they are expected to educate sleep-deprived, unprepared, and unmotivated children. Public schools are starting to resemble public orphanages.

Bigger government programs, such as the free breakfast and lunch programs, are a consequence of marriage-absence. Children should be fed by their parents—the norm in families formed through marriage.

“No Child Left Behind, the largest federal education law, will go down in history as one of the greatest academic failures ever, because it rested upon several false presumptions.”

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Society-Destroying Behavior
No Child Left Behind, the largest federal education law, will go down in history as one of the greatest academic failures ever, because it rested upon several false presumptions. It implied schools can be forced to produce better outcomes with more testing and completely ignored the fundamental domestic failures that drive educational failures.

Our system of college funding encourages illegitimacy and discourages marital responsibility. When calculating how to pay for college for Cynthia’s daughter, she noted having a baby now would secure coverage for her college expenses.

This is only one factor driving the disappearance of the middle class. Middle-income families are punished for responsible behavior while their children are encouraged to join a struggling underclass unlikely to rise into the middle class.

Restore Economic Competitiveness
Governments ought to protect citizens from tyranny, administrate justice, and build infrastructure. Marriage economics is the bedrock of all successful nations. Economic success requires strong marriages—the word “economy” comes from the Greek word oikonomia, or “management of a household.” America’s academic and economic competitiveness with marriage-based Asian countries depends on restoring marriage as the social norm.

How can we accomplish this critical task? Reforming divorce laws, encouraging shared parenting, and eliminating government incentives for cohabitation and marital irresponsibility will help children in our schools and free teachers from serving as surrogate parents.

The Center for Marriage Policy has a storehouse of policies to end marriage-destructive policies and encourage positive ones.

It is time for the United States to discard policies dooming the next generation and replace them with marriage-positive policies. We encourage teachers and legislators to join this historic effort at returning schools to their structural purpose by supporting marriage values policies. The success or failure of education depends on it.

Cynthia Davis (gopchief@gmail.com) is the former state representative for Missouri’s 19th District and executive director of the Center for Marriage Policy. David R. Usher (drusher@swbell.net) is president of the Center for Marriage Policy.
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2011 Editorial Calendar

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