Georgia Legislator Introduces Parent Trigger Legislation

By Casey Cheney

State Rep. Edward Lindsey (R-Atlanta) wants to make Georgia the eighth state to pass a Parent Trigger law.

House Bill 123, which Lindsey and five other legislators are cosponsoring, follows a new constitutional amendment permitting independent charter schools, which voters passed in November.

The bill would simplify the process for letting parents apply to have failing public schools converted into charter schools. More than one-half of attending students’ households must sign the petition for a conversion before it can take place.

Lindsey emphasized only one signature per household would be counted. Two-parent homes would not be able to cast two votes.

“We’re also looking at giving the parents more than one alternative,” Lindsey told School Reform News. “They could also simply petition that the existing administration in

Closing Cover Story

Tax-Sponsored Common Core Meetings Closed to Public

By Joy Pullmann

Though 46 states will spend an estimated $5 billion to $12 billion to implement a new set of national education standards called the Common Core, public officials are arranging these standards in hundreds of closed-door meetings.

Meetings among members of the Council of Chief State School Officers to write and discuss these standards and corresponding tests are closed to the public, though taxpayers pay for state officials to attend these meetings and to be CCSSO members.

MEETINGS, p. 2
Tax-Funded Common Core Meetings Closed to Public

Continued from page 1

“The Council of Chief State School Officers holds over one hundred meetings per year,” its meeting Web site states. “CCSSO meetings are closed to the public and attendance is by invitation only unless otherwise denoted” (emphasis in original).

CCSSO and the National Governors Association are two nonprofits that coordinated state involvement and adoption of the Common Core standards. The standards outline what states will expect K-12 children to know in math and English/language arts in each grade. Nearly all states adopted them in 2010 within five months of their release and say they plan to fully implement them, along with matching tests currently in development, by 2014–15.

“What was behind those policies, what was considered, the different elements that went into them, the ideas that went into them—it’s a black box,” said Bill Allison, editorial director of the Sunlight Foundation, a government transparency watchdog. “The public do have the right to know the laws that are going to affect them and their families, especially when they’re paying for them.”

Supported by State Tax Dollars

State membership in each related CCSSO committee costs $16,000 each year, and states can and do participate in several committees. Committee lead Indiana, for example, participates in the math and social studies committees, where 23 and 10 states, respectively, are members, said Indiana Department of Education spokesman Adam Baker. On its latest financial statement, the CCSSO reported $2,187,626 in revenue from membership dues for all activities in 2011.

Multiply just one membership fee by 46 participating states for a minimum of $736,000 in tax dollars the CCSSO receives each year for an initiative reshaping nearly every textbook, replacing nearly all state tests, overhauling teacher training nationwide, providing the basis to measure wide, providing the basis to measure

Frustrated Parents

Indiana resident Heather Crossin, whose children attend schools implementing the Common Core, attempted to attend an October 2012 CCSSO meeting in her Indianapolis hometown. Crossin called Michele Parks, a CCSSO meeting planner, to find out if she could attend. Parks said she couldn’t. Crossin asked to see a list of people on the social studies standards writing team. “I was told that was not available for public release,” Crossin said.

Ten weeks entailing dozens of emails and phone calls to at least six CCSSO spokesmen and personnel for access to the Indianapolis meeting or any others at last yielded an email to School Reform News from spokeswoman Kate Dando in December. “Our meetings/ sessions at our meetings are open to press really on a case by case basis,” she wrote.

Some reporters have attended some CCSSO meetings, usually on background, she said, which means they cannot directly quote what they hear. Why?

“It’s going to be reported that X state said this about their progress,” Carrie Heath Phillips, CCSSO’s Common Core director, told School Reform News. “When they have those conversations, we keep that protected, but it depends on the meeting and topic.”

CCSSO receives tax money from more than state dues. It receives millions from the U.S. Department of Education.

“Approximately 13% and 33% of the Council’s revenue and 25% and 34% of accounts receivable were provided by U.S. Department of Education grants or contracts for fiscal years 2011 and 2010, respectively,” the nonprofit’s 2010–11 financial statement reads.

Applying the 2011 percentage to that year’s revenues yields an estimated $3,450,930 in CCSSO revenue from the federal government, just in that year. In 2011, $558,000 came from the 2009 stimulus bill for CCSSO’s involvement with one of two networks creating new tests to fit the standards.

In 2010, the U.S. DOE granted those two networks $330 million in stimulus funds. This action, more than any other, led conservative supporters of the Common Core to complain of federal interference in education, a constitutionally protected state function.

‘Outsourcing a Core State Function’

CCSSO and NGA are member organizations for which states pay dues, said Emmett McGroarty, director of the American Principles Project’s child rights initiative.

NGA would not release member dues information to APP, he said. CCSSO did give basic information about membership costs, but not about what specific states paid.

States historically have created education standards in public meetings, with related documents also a matter of public record, Allison noted.

“The state is outsourcing a core state function to an outside organization that is then outsourcing to other organizations, and you can’t have the parental and legislator input you normally should,” Allison said. “Education is the future, and I do think people have the right to know who is writing the curriculum.”

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

THE HEARTLAND INSTITUTE
One South Wacker Drive #2740
Chicago, IL 60606
312/377-4000 voice • 312/377-5000 fax

School Reform News is available on the Internet. Point your web browser to http://www.heartland.org http://www.schoolreform-news.org

PUBLISHER
Joseph L. Bast

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER
Nikki Comerford

EXECUTIVE EDITOR
Diane Carol Bast

SENIOR EDITOR
S.T. Karnick

MANAGING EDITOR
Joy Pullmann
jpullmann@heartland.org

DESIGN AND PRODUCTION
Chris Whitehead

ADVERTISING MANAGER
Nikki Comerford

CIRCULATION MANAGER
Tonya Houston

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS
Ben DeGrow, Lori Drummer
David Kirkpatrick, Andy LeFevre
Dan Lips, Neal McCluskey, Vicki Murray
Connie Sadowski, Lisa Snell, Don Soifer
Matt Warner, Jim Waters

BOARD OF DIRECTORS
William Armistead, Joseph Bast, Robert Buford
Jeré Fabick, Dan Hales, James L. Johnston
Jeff Judson, Chuck Lang
Jeffrey Madden, Arthur Margulis
Jeffrey V. McKinley, Herbert J. Walberg

© 2013 The Heartland Institute. Nothing in this issue of School Reform News should be construed as reflecting the views of The Heartland Institute, nor as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation.

School Reform News is published 10 times per year by The Heartland Institute. Subscriptions are $36 per year. Order online at www.heartland.org. Heartland is a nonprofit and nonpartisan public policy research organization serving the nation’s federal and state elected officials, journalists, Heartland Members, and other opinion leaders. Its activities are tax-exempt under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

Parent Trigger Proposed in Georgia

Continued from page 1

the school be replaced.”

Under the current version of the bill, the state’s lowest-performing 20 percent of schools would be eligible for conversion into a charter school if parents or teachers petition for that.

Concern for the Customer

“Only in education do you have such complete disregard for the customer. Parent Trigger changes that dynamic,” said RiShawn Biddle, editor of Dropout Nation.

Biddle said Parent Trigger laws can provide benefits even if parents fail to get enough petition signatures to require changes at their child’s school. Citing results in California, he said motivating parents to sign petitions created a more cooperative relationship between parents and administrators.

Finer, potentially divisive points in the bill will have to be hammered out in-session, Lindsey said. These include determining what role the local school board will have in the transition, as school boards control education funds for individual schools. Legislators also will consider what role, if any, teachers will have in the process.

“If a Parent Trigger got passed, it must provide the necessary resources for parents to establish the quality school they know their community needs,” said Andrew Lewis, executive vice president of the Georgia Charter School Association.

Charter School Myths

Lindsey, Biddle, and Lewis all said the Georgia Parent Trigger bill will likely be passed into law, and they agreed Parent Trigger proponents must first dispel some misconceptions.

Parent Trigger opponents often complain the law too strongly promotes charter schools, Lindsey said.

In addition, Lewis said, some argue charter schools primarily benefit white, middle- to upper-income students. Lewis said Georgia voters’ approval of the charter school amendment demonstrates they don’t believe that.

The constitutional amendment favoring independent charters garnered 58.4 percent of the popular vote in Georgia. Of those votes, one-third came from the 27 Georgia counties where racial minorities are the majority.

“This is not a Republican-Democrat or suburban-urban issue,” Lewis said. “It is an issue of access to quality public education. We don’t care what people call public schools other than quality.”

Casey Cheney (caseyrcheney@gmail.com) is a writer and graduate of Hillsdale College.
Families Pack Indiana Common Core Hearing

By Joy Pullmann

Hundres of parents, grandparents, and children packed a January Indiana Senate hearing on Senate Bill 193, which would remove the state from the Common Core, a national list detailing what K-12 students should know in every grade.

State senators’ sentiments seemed mixed, but the audience leaned toward supporting SB 193. Approximately 300 people gathered two hours before the hearing for a rally—during a work and school day—to “stop the Common Core.” They packed the hearing room to the rafters. Small children bearing American flags sat on the floor, in front of their standing parents who were lining the walls.

Imposed Without Warning

Though Indiana adopted the standards two years ago, in August 2010 SB 193 cosponsor Scott Schneider (R-Indianapolis) said he and most other legislators hadn’t even heard of it until parents brought it to their attention. Two of those mothers testified, noting they had not heard of the Common Core standards until their elementary-school children started bringing home confusing, “fuzzy math” homework.

“Indiana’s standards adoption process before the Common Core was transparent and comprehensive,” Schneider said. “It brought in parents, teachers, community, and business leaders. When we cede control of our standards, that voice is lost, and I think it’s fundamental to democracy.”

Schneider’s main concerns are cost, quality, loss of local control, and a loss of diversity among private, charter, and home schools “when all roads lead to one test.”

Forty-five states adopted the standards, most within 32 business days of their appearance. Indiana’s Board of Education adopted the Common Core two months after it was published. States are currently implementing the standards, which will mean new national tests in 2015, entirely new instructional materials, tech upgrades, teacher training, and an overhaul of teacher preparation.

No state has yet fully withdrawn, but several—including Georgia, South Carolina, and Utah—are considering it.

Comparing Arguments

Common Core supporters also came out in force. Senators closely questioned several, including Michael Petrilli, vice president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

He gave three main reasons Indiana should “stay the course”: It has already spent time and money on the standards; Indiana students perform relatively poorly despite high state standards; and Common Core states will enjoy a “wave of innovation” caused by a national education market.

Petrilli also countered SB 193 supporters’ argument that the Common Core pushes algebra back into ninth grade and forces English teachers to incorporate too much “informational text.” The standards provide flexibility for accelerating students, he said, and the informational texts will largely be expected of history, math, and science teachers.

Questions Abound

Senators asked so many questions of people giving testimony that the two hours allotted for each side could not accommodate everyone on the schedule. Education Committee Chairman Dennis Kruse (R-Fort Wayne) gave an extra half hour to Common Core opponents after the official hearing ended.

State Sen. Jean Leising (R-Oldenburg) asked many questions and particularly wondered why a bevy of education and subject experts disagreed on the standards’ quality.

“If the standards are published, in black and white, why can’t we get the same answer on something like eighth grade algebra, something that simple?” she asked.

Senators also were interested in whether any Indians had participated in creating the standards, how to guard against federal encroachment, how test creators can design grade-level tests if the standards are flexible, and the impact on teachers of tying their evaluations to student test scores that are projected to drop radically once the Common Core tests arrive in 2014.

Near the end of the testimony, state Sen. Greg Taylor (D-Indianapolis) walked to the back of the hearing room to a pair of women and whispered to them, “What do you think?” They ducked into the hall to talk.

Tricky Process

Former Texas Education Commissioner Robert Scott testified he refused to sign his state onto the Common Core because its promoters insisted he do so before seeing the standards.

Literacy researcher Sandra Stotsky, who served on a Common Core approval committee but refused to sign off on it, discussed its English standards at the hearing.

“The English-language arts standards are chiefly empty skill sets,” she said. “They cannot even lead to a meaningful high school diploma until one begins to specify the content.”

“I quickly learned this was not about collaboration among the states—it was about control,” he said.

Several education professionals spoke in opposition to the bill. The Common Core requires more focus on informational text than Indiana’s standards, such as having students use manuals to operate machines, said Schauna Findlay, chief academic officer for Goodwill Education Initiatives. This has benefit- ter her “challenging” students, she said.

The legislature should not rescind a state board of education decision because that would usurp the board’s authority and traditional process, said Derek Redelman of the Indiana Chamber of Commerce. Schneider noted that concern and said he would amend the bill to address it.

The hearing lasted four-and-a-half hours. Several dozen people stayed to the end.

Indiana’s Senate Education Committee approved the bill on February 13 by a 7-4 vote. It moves now to the full Senate.

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is a research fellow of The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
By Kenric Ward

Fredericksburg, Va.—Virginia teachers' unions are squabbling over whether to endorse Gov. Bob McDonnell’s “Educator Fairness Act” that would streamline dismissals of “incompetent” teachers and lengthen probationary teaching from three to five years.

The Virginia Education Association, the state’s largest public-sector labor union, announced it supported the proposals. Apparently, other teachers’ unions didn’t get the memo.

“The VEA rushed into a compromise with the governor that was unnecessary and puts teachers’ due-process protections at risk,” said Steve Greenburg, president of the Fairfax County Federation of Teachers. The VEA “never consulted with their largest local in the state—the Fairfax Education Association—as they oppose the agreement as well.”

Alleging the VEA “hastily ‘sold out’ the teachers of Virginia,” Greenburg predicted union leaders “will receive some major pushback from their membership in the next few weeks.”

House Bill 2151, sponsored by Delegate Dickie Bell (R-Staunton) and Sen. Tommy Norment (R-Richmond), also would tighten evaluations of tenured teachers and give principals freedom to award tenure to “exceptional” teachers early. The new teacher evaluations would have to include student test scores as a “significant component and overall summative rating.” The bill also would require school boards to assign each new principal a mentor.

Union Business: Job Protection

“The reality is that [unions] don’t support reform,” said Terry Moe, a Stanford University-based teachers union expert. “Just as business firms are in the business of making money, the unions are in the business of protecting jobs. This is the key to understanding them,” said Moe, who authored the book Special Interest: Teachers Unions and America’s Public Schools.

“They are opposed to holding teachers accountable for performance. They don’t want teachers to be rigorously evaluated, especially based—even partly—on [student] test scores. They don’t want any teacher to lose a job simply because they aren’t good in the classroom.”

That said, Moe noted “unions are in a difficult political environment these days.”

“In Virginia, the political deck is stacked against them, and they probably knew in this instance that Gov. McDonnell was going to get his reform package whether they ‘supported’ it or not,” he said.

Working Behind the Scenes

Moe suggested a Machiavellian scenario in which the 60,000-member VEA “could publicly support” McDonnell’s plan and then, “behind the scenes, work with the governor’s people to try to soften some of its provisions in return for their ‘support.’”

VEA President Meg Gruber said in a statement, “In consultation with our members across the state, we’ve been working with Gov. McDonnell, Secretary of Education Laura Fornash, and others to improve the teacher dismissal process so that it is efficient and fair.

“We have agreed with the governor on several proposed changes to existing law we believe meets this goal. We believe the VEA’s involvement in the process has resulted in an improved bill, and Virginia’s teachers have had a voice in laws that directly affect their profession,” Gruber’s statement continued.

Such statements reflect the union’s strategy for maintaining its power, Moe said, “not a reflection of their truly ‘coming around’ on teacher accountability.”

The American Federation of Teachers’ Fairfax affiliate is already poking holes in McDonnell’s proposal, which cleared the House Education Committee on January 21.

Allegations of Abuse

Greenburg questioned the legislation’s definition of “exceptional” teachers—“it makes us nervous,” he said—and speculated school administrations could abuse the proposed streamlined grievance process.

“The language the VEA agreed to provides that the hearing officer is chosen by the school board. If this passes, removing an employee is simply a ‘formality,’ as the administration has control of all of the variables,” he said.

A 2012 Watchdog.org survey of school district contracts found only a minuscule percentage of instructors failed to earn “continuing contracts”—Virginia’s version of tenure—after the three-year probationary period. This fits with data from the National Center for Education Statistics showing just 1.3 percent of Virginia teachers were pink-slipped for poor performance—one of the lowest percentages among the states.

Representatives from the Fairfax Education Association were not available for comment.

Kenric Ward (kenric@watchdog.virginia.org) is the Virginia bureau chief for the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity. Reprinted from Watchdog.org with permission.
With 18 titles so far, The Heartland Institute’s ebook offerings range from *The Obamacare Disaster* and *The Patriot’s Toolbox* to *Booker T. Washington: A Re-Examination*. In the convenient, easily downloaded Kindle format, you can read these and other Heartland books on one handy device.

Visit Amazon’s Kindle store, search for The Heartland Institute, and discover our offerings for yourself.

We’re just a click away!
HHS Releases Negative Head Start Evaluation

By Lindsey Burke

In January, Congress voted to send an extra $100 million to Head Start, a few weeks after the Department of Health and Human Services released its long-overdue evaluation of the federal preschool program, finding it has no benefit to children past first grade.

Researchers finished collecting study data in 2008 but didn’t release the report until December 2012, with an October date. Head Start began in 1965 as a small summer program and has cost taxpayers $180 billion since then.

“President Barack Obama has promised to show fiscal restraint and to reward ‘evidence-based’ education programs. The evidence is overwhelming that Head Start does not offer disadvantaged kids a significant advantage, despite costing more than $8 billion a year,” said Lisa Snell, education and child welfare director at the Reason Foundation. “The federal government has failed to offer value for preschool dollars and should no longer be in the early education business.”

The 2012 report used the most scientifically rigorous method, called “random assignment,” tracking 5,000 three- and four-year-old children through the end of first grade. Children were assigned to a control group that did not attend Head Start or to an experiment group that participated. It followed up a 2010 Head Start Impact Study that reported almost identical results.

By third grade children who attend Head Start cannot be distinguished from their peers who didn’t.

U.S. Students Lack Crucial Vocabulary

By Ashley Bateman

Vocabulary is vital to learning in every subject, studies show.

To get a more accurate view of U.S. students’ vocabulary, the National Center for Education Statistics adapted its vocabulary and reading comprehension assessment in 2009. The second round of results shows U.S. students have only a mediocre vocabulary.

Vocabulary is central to reading, said Angela Glymp, an associate research scientist at NCES. The new test asked students to understand words in passages rather than to match them to definitions.

Although overall average vocabulary scores for fourth- and eighth-grade students changed little between 2009 and 2011, Glymp noted some convergence of scores.

Higher-performing students in both fourth and eighth grade scored higher in 2011 than in 2009.

Lower-performing students scored higher in 2011 than in 2009.

“On average, students don’t know the words they need to flourish as learners, earners or citizens,” prominent literacy researcher E.D. Hirsch Jr. has written. “Math is an important index to general competence, but on average words are twice as important.” Among other works, Hirsch is author of The Schools We Need: And Why We Don’t Have Them.

Context is Crucial

The results show students who scored high on vocabulary also scored high in reading comprehension.

The two subjects complement one another, said Linda Bevilacqua, president of the Core Knowledge Foundation. “The key is to arm kids with enough broad, general knowledge so that they have the context to intuit unfamiliar words and, through repeated exposure, become comfortable with them,” Bevilacqua said.

The National Reading Panel has found children learn new words both indirectly in everyday life or from other school subjects and directly through instruction.

“There has been a tendency in the elementary grades to think of literacy as something separate and distinct from learning about various topics in history, science, or the arts,” Bevilacqua said. “This is shortsighted and misleading.”

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

Expensive and Ineffective

Specifically, Head Start failed to raise the cognitive development of four-year-olds and reduced three-year-olds’ math abilities. It also failed to improve kids’ social-emotional, health, or parenting outcomes.

When the children reached third grade, the evaluation found similarly lackluster results: Head Start had no long-term impact on the cognitive ability of either the three- or four-year-old cohort and failed to improve the reading, language, and math ability of participants.

“Politicians and policy experts need to recognize that Head Start produces harm. Based on teacher assessments, participation in Head Start is associated with decreased math abilities, being more likely to be shy or socially reticent, and a higher degree of unfavorable emotional symptoms than similar children without access to the program. This defective program should be terminated,” said David Mullhausen, a researcher at The Heritage Foundation.

The evaluation also found Head Start failed to change four out of five social-emotional behaviors parents reported and found no statistically significant effect on teacher-reported social-emotional development of children.

Suspicious Handling

HHS not only released the study four years after collecting its data, it did so on a media dead day: the Friday before Christmas.

University of Arkansas professor Jay Greene, one of few who noticed the report’s release, excoriated the “federal government’s abuse of research” on his blog.

The delay happened “because the news was not as favorable toward Head Start as people would like. It has been ‘eased out,’” said Nicolas Zill, a psychologist and former head of the Child and Family Study Area at Westat. Westat conducted the Head Start evaluations, and Zill oversaw previous editions.

“It does seem to be the case that the current effort to hold more programs accountable stems directly from the Impact studies. So while that is a little bit heartening, we still have a long way to go,” Zill said.

Did HHS need four years to finish its evaluation? “You could certainly do the main analyses within a year. No question about it,” Zill said.

Other Reports Show Fraud

This latest study also comes on the heels of a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report revealing fraud in Head Start. The GAO sent undercover investigators to Head Start centers across the country and found program employees counseling parents to lie that their incomes were lower to appear eligible.

The $100 million Head Start earmark was tucked inside the second Hurricane Sandy spending bill, along with many other earmarks. According to the Senate appropriations committee, that money will go to 265 Head Start centers in areas affected by the storm, at a cost of more than $377,000 per site.

Lindsey M. Burke (lindsey.burke@heritage.org) is an education policy analyst at The Heritage Foundation.

PODCAST INFO

**Democratic Legislator Proposes Chicago Vouchers**

By Benjamin Yount

Springfield, Ill.—Lottery tickets can give 1,000 Chicago kids school choice, one Chicago Democrat says.

State Rep. LaShawn Ford (D-Chicago) has introduced legislation that would pull nearly $6 million from the Illinois lottery for K-8 private school “scholarships.”

Lawmakers started the lottery in the 1980s to “save” public education. Illinois’ education budget was nearly $4 billion last year, and the lottery pumped about $600 million into it. House Bill 76 would use $6 million of it for scholarships.

“In one ZIP code in Chicago alone there is nearly $30 million in ticket sales,” Ford said. “Why don’t we take some of that and use it to give kids in that area a choice?”

His legislation would apply to Chicago students only. Chicago has long been one of the country’s worst school districts. Approximately 80 percent of Chicago fourth-graders are not proficient in basic math and reading, and half the city’s students drop out.

John Russell, who heads the school choice group Freedom to Learn Illinois, said Ford’s plan will put the Democrat at odds with Chicago’s teachers union. “Teachers—most teachers care about their kids, but teachers unions only care about the union,” Russell said.

Russell said the continuing tension between the Chicago Teachers Union and Mayor Rahm Emanuel over September’s teacher strike may give Ford’s legislation more supporters.

Illinois’ last serious attempt at school choice failed in 2010 when the Illinois House rejected a plan to let students attending poor-performing schools choose another.

Russell said teachers unions killed that legislation. The Illinois Education Association, one of the state’s largest teachers unions, did not respond to calls for this story.

**Careful Labeling**

Ford said he doesn’t think Illinois would adopt a full school-choice program yet, which is why his legislation offers “scholarships.”

“Illinois OK’d civil unions because they were called civil unions, not gay marriage,” Ford said. “The value of a scholarship is the same. It’s just not called a voucher.”

HB 76 would allot $6,000 for each student’s private tuition through eighth grade.

The $6,000 is just below Illinois’ required per-pupil public school funding level of $6,119. Chicago Public Schools spend $16,000 per student, according to the Cato Institute.

**Bill Prospects**

Ford said he can get his legislation to a vote this spring, and he’s sure it will become law.

“We have to convince individual lawmakers that we need innovative ways to educate our kids,” Ford said.

Russell said Ford may have a shot at getting his legislation approved, in part because of the mayor-union spat.

CTU members walked out of classrooms in September 2012 in a fight over pay and teacher evaluations. The union is still bickering with Emanuel over the mayor’s desire to close several half-empty Chicago schools or turn them into charter schools.

Ford said it’s too early to tell how that fight will influence his bill.

Benjamin Yount (ben@illinoiswatchdog.org) is a reporter for Illinois Watchdog, where an earlier version of this article appeared. Reprinted with permission.
Legislators:
Make Us Your New Legislative Aide!

Join Heartland's Legislative Forum today and stay on top of the latest research and policy solutions.

Why Join?
Simply, the Heartland Institute believes what elected officials need, they elected officials. It's what we do, it's what we are. It's what we've been doing for 20 years. Heartland Institute has been that successful.

Benefits of Membership Include:

- **Tribal Scholarships in Heartland's Emerging Issues Forums**
- **Monthly zoom in your very own Heartland “Think Tank”**
- **Bring your own ideas**
- **Historically in Legislative Forums, sometimes even more.**
- **Complimentary copies of Heartland Policy Studies and books.**

Membership is limited to current elected officials and costs just $500 for two years or $1,770 for a lifetime membership. As a lifetime member, you will enjoy the great benefits the Legislative Forum offers for your lifetime in office, along with reduced benefits thereafter.

Visit heartland.org/legforum to sign up.

For more information, please contact Robin Knows at 312-2977-4800 or email her at robin@heartland.org.

Speaker: Chip Rogers
Majority Leader
Georgia Senate
Call for More Choice in Wis., Vouchers’ Birthplace

By M.D. Kittle

Madison, Wis.—School choice in Wisconsin has come a long way since the late 1980s when Republican Gov. Tommy Thompson and Milwaukee led the national school voucher revolution.

What began as a few private religious schools serving a few hundred public school children in inner-city Milwaukee has swelled to scores of schools reaching nearly 25,000 students, most among the poorest of the poor.

In 2012, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program expanded into neighboring city Racine, where 11 private schools boast a total enrollment of more than 500 students. Racine private schools expect to open 500 more spots next year after state-imposed caps on the number of voucher recipients expire, says Terry Brown, vice president of School Choice Wisconsin, the Milwaukee-based advocacy group that supports parents’ right to choose their children’s education.

School choice has grown by leaps and bounds in Wisconsin over the past three decades, including the introduction of public charter schools and virtual schools, institutions not bound by the same rules as traditional public schools.

Students Learn More

While choice and traditional school advocates in other locales debate the potential merits of nontraditional K-12 education models, proponents of Milwaukee’s choice schools point to real achievement gains.

The School Choice Demonstration Project, which tracked two grade-level peer groups in Milwaukee Public Schools and the choice program, found the latter posted higher graduation rates: 76 percent to MPS’s 69 percent among students who began ninth grade in 2006. The difference was less pronounced for eighth-grade students of that year, with 73.7 percent of choice students graduating from high school compared with 71.6 percent of MPS students.

Overall, the research found enrolling in private school increases the likelihood of students graduating from high school and enrolling and persisting in postsecondary education by 4 percent to 7 percent.

Cut Costs by Half

The choice program educates students at about half the taxpayer cost of Milwaukee Public Schools. Milwaukee Parental Choice schools receive per-pupil vouchers of $6,442, compared to $13,239 in tax dollars per student who attend MPS traditional schools ...

That assertion cites a report that shows 63 percent of charter school students were performing as well as or significantly better than students in traditional public schools.

National School Choice Week Energy

Although choice advocates have had their battles with public schools over the years, a host of players from the education community came together January 30 to celebrate National School Choice Week.

National School Choice Week chartered a historic rail car and just completed the school choice movement’s first cross-country, whistle-stop train tour to “galvanize public support for enhanced educational options.” The 14-city tour made its sixth stop in Milwaukee.

An array of education organizations hosted the event, including School Choice Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Charter Schools Association, Milwaukee Public Schools, Democrats for Educational Reform, and Hispanics for School Choice.

Improving Voucher Laws

In the current legislative session, Brown said, school choice advocates are not only calling on lawmakers to expand choice options, they also would like a dual funding system that pumps more resources into choice high schools because high school education is typically more expensive than elementary education.

“What we really want to do is open up choice, to allow schools to innovate and to allow parents to pick the winners, and not bureaucrats,” Brown said. “‘As schools innovate, their partners will begin to innovate, and the result will be better education for our kids and more efficient costs for taxpayers.”

M.D. Kittle (mkittle@wisconsinreporter.com) reports for Wisconsin Reporter. Reprinted from Watchdog.org with permission.

LEARN MORE


Fiscal Cliff Deal Delays Needed Education Cuts

By Evelyn B. Stacey

January’s fiscal cliff deal delayed major cuts to federal education spending at least until March, when mandatory cuts are slated to decrease it by 8.2 percent, or $4 billion. “While $4 billion is a fairly large number, there are a lot of programs from which it can be taken,” said Michael Shires, an associate professor at Pepperdine University’s School of Public Policy. “Reducing the federal role in education spending may be one of those areas of opportunity where the federal government can more easily cut knowing the consequences will be mitigated by actors at the state and local level.”


By Isabel Lyman

Girls get higher grades because they are less trouble in class, a new study has found.

University of Georgia and Columbia University researchers found girls’ classroom behavior influences how their teachers, consciously or unconsciously, assess their performance.

Christopher Cornwell, David Mustard, and Jessica Van Parys combed through the results of reading, math, and science standardized tests from nearly 6,000 elementary students and compared those to the students’ classroom progress.

Although girls outscored boys in reading, the data revealed “gender disparities in teacher grades start early and uniformly favor girls. In every subject area, boys are represented in grade distributions below where their test scores would predict.”

Reason: Better Attitudes

The reason for this apparent bias, the researchers say, is girls’ strength in noncognitive skills. “You can think of ‘approaches to learning’ as a rough measure of what a child’s attitude toward school is. It includes six items that rate the child’s attentiveness, task persistence, eagerness to learn, learning independence, flexibility, and organization,” Cornwell said in a press statement. “Anybody who’s a parent of boys and girls can tell you that girls are more of all of that.”

Case for Education Diversity

Sabrina Schaeffer, executive director of the Washington, DC-based Independent Women’s Forum and mother of two daughters and one son, says the researchers make a compelling case for education diversity. “We know that girls and boys play differently, learn differently, and have a range of strengths, aptitudes, and interests,” Schaeffer said. “Still we continue to encourage a one-size-fits-all public school system that works to educate all children in exactly the same way. This research shows that girls are clearly more suited for the traditional classroom setting, while boys would likely benefit from an alternative structure.”

Given the high percentage of women who are elementary school teachers, the study notes, those who teach young men may need to reevaluate their assumptions about boys and girls. Parents of young boys may want to delay formal schooling for a more relaxed online model or send their child to a same-sex school, Schaeffer said.

Isabel Lyman writes from Petoskey, Michigan.

LEARN MORE


By Sally Nelson

A Utah state senator is proposing to let private investors put up $10 million to fund more preschool for “at-risk” students eligible for special education. If the program boosts learning, the state would pay the investors back.

State Sen. Aaron Osmond (R–South Jordan) is drafting a bill to spend tax dollars on private preschool programs aimed at developmental delays. Osmond said the opposite, claiming “at-risk” students coming into public education with either poor English skills or none at all, he said. “Many are in developmental language delays, and others are being helped through English Language Assistant support as part of their regular classes.”

Many Kids Labeled ‘Delayed’

Special-education enrollment attributed to developmental delays is growing at four times the rate of regular enrollment in Utah, Osmond said.

“We still haven’t been able to number the students that are struggling,” he said.

Typically, when children enter special education in early grades, they remain in it for the duration of their schooling, a Voices for Utah Children (VUC) report stated.

Osmond says he plans to base his program on several successful Utah programs aimed at developmental problems children exhibit before entering elementary school.

VUC, in partnership with Granite School District Preschool Services, surveyed four-year-olds eligible for special-education programs and living in poor areas. Researchers found the children who attended high-quality preschool used special-education services far less than “at-risk” children who did not.

“High-quality preschool programs tend to maintain their progress. Risk students in these preschool programs expand education options, conserve limited public funds, and better ensure that students get the services that are right for them. Such policies are far better than a well-intentioned, one-size-fits-all preschool model.”

Better Idea: Parent Choice

Alger says directing funds into a solid academic foundation for students makes sense, but she recommends a school choice model some states already use.

“A better policy model is Arizona’s Empowerment Scholarship Account program,” she said. “Under the program, the state deposits 90 percent of the per-pupil funding amount into designated accounts when parents of children with special needs choose not to enroll them in government schools.”

Parents can use those funds to purchase private education services they believe best meet their children’s needs.

“Utah lawmakers should also consider implementing a corporate tax-credit scholarship program, allowing businesses to make tax-deductible contributions to nonprofit scholarship-granting organizations,” she said. “Such programs expand education options, conserve limited public funds, and better ensure that students get the services that are right for them. Such policies are far better than a well-intentioned, one-size-fits-all preschool model.”

Sally Nelson (sallynelson7@gmail.com) writes from Hillsdale, Michigan.
Bill Would Expand Indiana’s Voucher Program

By Jim Waters

House Bill 1003 would lift a spending cap on Indiana’s voucher program and ditch a requirement that students attend public school for a year before becoming eligible.

Although the program currently pays up to 90 percent of a high school student’s tuition, it limits the voucher to $4,500 for those in grades two through eight. House Education Committee Chairman Robert Behning’s (R-Indianapolis) bill raises the cap to $5,500 beginning in June 2013 and $6,500 in June 2014.

HB 1003 also would allow siblings of current voucher students to receive a voucher without first attending a public school.

Punishing Sacrifice

State Rep. Vernon Smith (D-Gary) says the move would result in the state “funding people who already are paying for their own private education of their children.”

That argument is “a red herring” designed to confuse the issue, said Robert Enlow, president of the Indiana-based Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

“There are all sorts of people ‘who can pay’ who are getting a supposedly free education right now,” Enlow said. “How many millionaires in gated communities, for example, get a public education for free even though they could pay?”

Behning noted parents still would be required to be under the program’s income ceiling and said, “These families and their children should not be punished because they have sacrificed to provide the best possible educational choice for their children in the past.”

Families with incomes up to 150 percent of federal poverty guidelines, or $63,964 for a family of four, are eligible.

Strong Demand

Voucher enrollment more than doubled in 2012–13, the program’s second year, from 3,919 participants to 9,130.

“There is no doubt that there is demand for increasing the access to vouchers to as many children as possible,” said Leslie Hiner, a Friedman Foundation vice president.

Dayanna Vazquez-Buquex, 16, emigrated from Mexico with her family when she was six years old. The voucher program allows her and her younger sister, Ashley, to attend Catholic schools in Indianapolis, which perform better than their previous public schools.

Vouchers mean “an opportunity to do better in life and have a great chance to not just get good grades and all that but actually get to a point, get to a goal, by those grades,” Vazquez-Buquex said.

Many Indiana private schools accepting vouchers ranked among the best in the state on state tests.

“A voucher is not charity,” Hiner said. “It’s a method of funding education that recognizes that every child should have the right to attend any school where the child can learn, regardless of the income of that child’s parents.”

Senate Republicans Uncertain

Although the bill seems likely to pass the House, it faces scrutiny among Senate Republicans concerned about the additional costs. The average voucher currently covers $3,932 in private school tuition, a significant savings compared to the $5,000 to $8,000, depending on the district, the state currently spends on each public school student. Unused state money goes back to districts.

If one quarter of the current voucher students have siblings who will use vouchers, opponents estimate it will cost Indiana nearly $9 million a year because districts retain state money above the voucher amount for each voucher student who leaves their local public school. In 2012, the vouchers program sent $4 million back to traditional public schools.

Enlow said these overall savings would cover the costs of expanding the program.

“The [extra] distribution to traditional public schools might shrink, but it wouldn’t disappear,” he said.

The Indiana Supreme Court heard arguments on the program in November but has not yet rendered a decision. The arguments hinged on whether the program constitutes the state government sponsoring a religion by sending money to some Christian schools, or whether the program does no such thing because individuals, not the state, choose where to send the money.

By Jim Waters is vice president of policy and communications at the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

Online Learning Grows

Angelika Weiss’s family “technically can’t afford” online Latin classes for their sixth-grader and for all four kids to attend a private school in their southern Minnesota town, “but we’re making it a priority,” she said.

“Online high school is a lot cheaper than if he would go to a private school.”

Their private online school offers classes local public schools don’t, she said, such as Latin, logic, and challenging history classes. Many families also are choosing tax-subsidized online education because it costs less than private schools but still allows families to transmit their values.

Last school year, 275,000 students enrolled in online K-12 programs across the nation, more than five times the enrollment a decade ago, according to the Evergreen Education Group. Currently, 31 states and the District of Columbia offer online public schools.

Weiss says she feels more confident enrolling her son in online classes than attempting to homeschool, especially for high-school work. She and her son both appreciate online education’s flexibility.

“With online education, there is so much time not wasted in the classroom,” she said. “My son can be out in the community volunteering or working. Let’s face it: The inside of a classroom isn’t the real world.”

— Joy Pullmann

“A voucher is not charity. It’s a method of funding education that recognizes that every child should have the right to attend any school where the child can learn, regardless of the income of that child’s parents.”

LESLIE HINER, VICE PRESIDENT, FRIEDMAN FOUNDATION FOR EDUCATIONAL CHOICE

LEARN MORE


Iowa Ranks Low on Teacher Prep as Gov. Seeks Revamp

By Sheena Dooley

Des Moines, Iowa—Iowa’s teacher-preparation programs fail to produce graduates who are ready to lead a classroom, according to a new study that quickly drew fire from some educators.

The National Council on Teacher Quality released its “2012 State Teacher Policy Yearbook” in January, grading Iowa’s teacher preparation as just below the D-plus national average. The state fell short on requiring elementary and secondary teachers to pass content-specific courses, holding teacher colleges accountable for their graduates’ classroom performance, and ensuring student teachers have demonstrated success, according to the report.

It cited Iowa as one of 36 states that did not improve over the previous year as measured by the policy changes state legislators did or did not adopt.

Governor Focuses on Teachers

Gov. Terry Branstad (R) released a plan for altering Iowa teacher preparation about two weeks before the report was released. Branstad would raise starting teacher pay, create a tiered system where proven “mentor teachers” earn more, and tie teacher evaluations to student test scores.

“The governor in Iowa has been talking about these issues,” said Sandi Jacobs, vice president of NCTQ. “The director of the state department has been talking about them. There are some policy pieces that are playing out in the regulation writing process. At the policy level, the ball just needs to keep rolling.”

Jason Glass, director of the Iowa Department of Education, did not directly contest the group’s findings, but he categorized their measurements as nonobjective policy preferences.

“Teacher preparation is a major driver for schools,” Glass said. “But this study is different than to say if a report card came out that said how many kids there were in poverty—objective indicators. This is policy-driven.”

Iowa did take steps last year to improve teacher preparation, with lawmakers approving a requirement for incoming teachers to pass tests in pedagogy and content, he said. Officials with the Iowa State Board of Education are also just a few months away from acting on a proposal to redesign accreditation requirements for colleges of education, although details remain vague.

Shocking Policies

The report reveals several shocking policies states hold on teacher preparation. For example, 26 states require teachers to take middle-school-level tests, or none at all, to receive certification. Every state but Texas holds a lower bar for prospective teachers than it does for general college admission. Every state but Massachusetts sets the passing score for elementary teacher licensing tests at below the average score for all test-takers, and most states set the bar for passing at the 16th percentile or lower, meaning 84 percent of test-takers pass.

Only eight states—Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, Ohio, Tennessee, and Texas—track the graduates of teacher colleges by student achievement to measure teacher college quality.

Because of these pervasive low standards, the report gives states low marks all around and recommends changes: raise admissions standards for teacher preparation, align teacher preparation with the Common Core K-12 math and science standards, improve new teachers’ in-class preparation, raise licensing standards, raise requirements for special-education teachers, and measure teacher colleges by their students’ ability to educate.

Jean Hessburg, spokeswoman for the Iowa State Education Association teachers union, said she is skeptical of grades from groups like the national council. As an example, she cited the low academic performance of states that received B-, the top grade achieved by any state. Alabama, Florida, Indiana, and Tennessee all earned that grade but typically produce subpar student performance, she said.

Teacher Quality Recommendations

The report criticized Iowa practices involving admission to teacher-preparation programs; elementary, middle, and high school preparation; student teaching; and teacher-preparation accountability.

The report recommended Iowa require a common teacher college admissions test and that its accepted students score in the top half, while requiring elementary teacher candidates take a content test assessing all subject areas. Graduates also should have to pass a test gauging their skills in the “science of reading” and specialize in one content area, the report said.

Additionally, Iowa middle and high school teacher candidates should have to pass a content exam for every subject area they teach, the report recommended. Student teachers should have to show their effectiveness through classroom results, and teacher-preparation programs should be accountable, either by collecting data to monitor the quality of educators they produce or setting minimum performance standards, the study said.

“The framework we developed was developed by looking at available resources, stakeholder groups, and best practices,” Jacobs said. “The good news is that states are making progress. The progress is not tremendous. But it’s showing that this is starting to grab the attention of states and they are starting to move forward.”

Sheena Dooley (dooley@iowawatchdog.org) is a reporter for Iowa Watchdog. This article is reprinted here with permission.
Louisiana Parents: Our Voucher Schools Are ‘Wonderful’

By Jim Waters

Louisiana parents remain largely satisfied with their kids’ new private schools four months after joining a program that expanded New Orleans vouchers statewide, according to numbers from the state’s education department.

Of the 4,944 voucher students in September 2012, 4,815 remained in December, according to two of the four annual counts at all schools participating in the Louisiana Scholarship Program. The state counts students before sending schools scholarship money for each.

“Oh gosh, it’s wonderful,” said Cyndi Maurice of the program. Her daughter Alyssa, 8, attends Our Lady of Divine Providence School in Metairie. It’s one of 117 private schools participating in the program’s first year.

Alyssa’s new teachers adapt their instruction to how her daughter learns, Maurice said. The teachers “are just outstanding.”

Melissa Ligon cited “the environment” when heaping praise on Hosanna Christian School in Baton Rouge, where she has three children enrolled. “It’s more friendly,” she said. “It is open-door. I’m welcome to come in freely and monitor my kids.”

Satisfied Customers

The high retention numbers aren’t surprising, considering 10,400 children originally applied for vouchers. The education department used a lottery to determine recipients.

Funds come from Louisiana’s Minimum Foundation Program (MFP), a fund the state constitution designates for education. The vouchers pay private tuition for low-income students who would otherwise have to attend schools the state graded C, D, or F.

Shelly Stabile told the Louisiana Federation for Children (LFC) that when son Kaden, 5, heard he could attend Northlake Christian Academy in Covington, where Kaden had attended a summer camp, “he was so excited, jumping up and down, hugging me.”

Stabile, a single mother who cannot afford private school tuition, yearned to provide her son a sound education, she said.

Labor unions have sued to stop the scholarship program. In November, District Judge Tim Kelley ruled it unconstitutional for the state to use MFP funds to pay private tuition.

Even so, Kelley allowed the program to continue while state lawyers appeal to the state supreme court. LFC spokeswoman Stephanie Ryan said her organization will join the appeal.

Louisiana’s constitution does not prohibit vouchers as long as all public education needs are met, Ryan said, and ending vouchers would damage academic progress students have already made.

Academic Acceleration

“Fifth-graders who enrolled at their scholarship school on a second-grade reading or math level have improved nearly a grade level in just a few months,” said Kevin Kane, the institute’s president. “The program should survive regardless of the outcome in court.”

Jim Waters is vice president of policy and communications at the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions in Bowling Green, Kentucky.
Young Entrepreneurs Bootstrap to Avoid College Debt

By Rachel Davison

In 2011, roughly two-thirds of the nation’s college seniors graduated with debt averaging more than $26,000, according to the Project on Student Debt.

While much national attention has focused on higher tax spending to address the problem, a new book highlights young entrepreneurs who, through their businesses, graduate college with little to no debt.

Geoff White, author of Lemonade Stand Economics, encourages young people to finance their education through small business.

“Everyone is talking about [students] needing to cut expenses,” he said. “There is no one chirping on their other shoulder, saying, ‘You need to figure out a way to make more than $7.50 an hour. You need to make $20, $25, $50 an hour.’”

A serial entrepreneur who started his first business at 17, White realized early he could be paid five times his wages when a customer offered him a contract to clean her windows. Now White wants to help other high school students make the same conceptual leap: “An entrepreneurial kid thinks differently.”

White researched and profiled a number of these “entrepreneurial kids” who have limited their college debt through hard work. Here are just three. You can find many more—even fourth- and fifth-graders—on the Lemonade Stand Economics Web site.

Rachel Davison is an educator and writer living in Indiana. She is editor of Liberty for Kids.com.

Robert Felton, 20
Junior, University of Wisconsin-Stout, Business & Entrepreneurship Major
Owner, Never Lost Jewelry

While a student at Renaissance School for the Arts, then-16 Robert Felton had to design clothes for art class. When he repeatedly broke the sewing machines, he turned to a box of broken bits and buttons and fashioned a simple necklace. His teacher was so enthralled she offered to buy it—and a business was born.

With pieces ranging from $8 to $52, Felton spends summers traveling up to four hours to attend trunk shows and fairs, where he earns half his annual $8,000 business income. Felton says his entrepreneurial spirit is innate.

“When I was little I would sell painted rocks to my neighbors,” he said. “I would have garage sales without my parents’ permission. It was how I played.” Felton uses this real-life experience to enliven boring college business classes.

In finance or marketing classes, “projects will come up and all the other students moan,” he said. “The coolest thing about running your own business is that you are like ‘Oh, my god, I totally had to fix this.’”

Felton is a junior with $2,000 in student loans. His business eliminates the need for crushing student debt, and his classes apply to life immediately. Once, an accounting class taught him how to avoid a government fine: “I learn better because I am excited about taking what I am learning and putting it into my own context.”

Chloe Siamof, 18
Freshman, Yale University, Architecture Major
Founder, Chloe’s Popcorn Stand

When the Appleton, Wisconsin Farmer’s Market moved to a larger location, 11-year-old Chloe Siamof was saddened to lose her popcorn stand spot. With a small loan from her parents, she bought a 6-ounce popcorn maker and set up shop at a new stand her father built. Every summer for the next seven years, Chloe’s Popcorn Stand was open for business at the Appleton Farmer’s Market and the city’s summer concert series.

Siamof managed every aspect of the business, including an expansion to include kettle corn. In her final summer, she earned more than $500 a weekend. “The popcorn stand is the only job I ever had,” she said.

“Siamof credits her popcorn stand experience with helping her start an initiative to restore her 70-year-old high school: “My contacts and experience in dealing with people through the business meant that I had the initiative to go out there.”

Now finishing her first semester in college, Siamof is continuing her entrepreneurial activity by job-shadowing New York City start-ups. Although she received numerous scholarships, her popcorn business is also helping pay Yale University’s $58,600 annual price tag. She plans to graduate with no debt.

This past summer Siamof sold her business to a 26-year-old hot dog vendor and his teenage brother. “So it is still benefitting young entrepreneurs,” she said.

Heather Mrotek, 18
Sophomore, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Accounting Major
Owner, Passion Pursuit Photography

A tall, “amazonian” teenager, Heather Mrotek began modeling near her hometown in Hartland, Wisconsin. She soon moved behind the camera, working as a photographer’s assistant during high school. While still in high school she became very involved with DECA, a young adult business network. Once she reached college and debt began to pile up, Mrotek struck out on her own, incorporating Passion Pursuit Photography as a full business.

“When I started getting involved in the legal aspect of my business I really grew, not only as a business owner but as an adult,” she said. Now a college sophomore, she has photographed more than 100 clients for sittings that average $200.

“To show you the difference from my freshman to sophomore year, without my business I took out a $10,000 loan. Since starting my company in July 2012 I haven’t had to take out any loan, and I was able to move out of the dorms to a home where I have to pay for utilities and everything,” she said. “Even if I don’t do Passion Pursuit forever, I will be an entrepreneur forever.”

Photos courtesy LemonadeStandEconomics.com
States Should Not Dictate Curriculum

By Audrey Spalding

Recently, on route to Michigan’s northernmost point, it struck me that Calumet is more than 500 miles away from Lansing, where state legislators make policy. Yet the notion of drafting statewide policies to govern school curriculum and practices in places as different as Lansing, the Upper Peninsula, and Detroit is rarely criticized as absurd.

The Michigan Merit Curriculum (MMC) became law in 2006, imposing a sweeping statewide expansion of graduation requirements that specified how many credits of math, science, language arts, social studies, and other courses students must take. State Superintendent Mike Flanagan promoted these expanded requirements at the time saying “[they] will evolve Michigan from being a Rust Belt, blue-collar state to being a high-tech and high-skills state.”

But preliminary data on the first wave of Michigan students subject to the new requirements should give policymakers pause. Since the MMC requirements were imposed, graduation rates have dropped and lower-achieving students have been hit the hardest.

The Michigan Education Research Consortium released data in October 2012 showing the five-year graduation rate for the lowest-achieving students declined by 5 percentage points after MMC went into effect. This is a large drop when only about half of the lowest-achieving students were making it to graduation beforehand.

The Michigan Merit Curriculum (MMC) became law in 2006, imposing a sweeping statewide expansion of graduation requirements that specified how many credits of math, science, language arts, social studies, and other courses students must take. State Superintendent Mike Flanagan promoted these expanded requirements at the time saying “[they] will evolve Michigan from being a Rust Belt, blue-collar state to being a high-tech and high-skills state.”

But preliminary data on the first wave of Michigan students subject to the new requirements should give policymakers pause. Since the MMC requirements were imposed, graduation rates have dropped and lower-achieving students have been hit the hardest.

It is easy to see Calumet and Detroit students have different needs, but the [Michigan Merit Curriculum] requirements apply regardless of student need, background, or local opportunities.”

By Audrey Spalding

Recently, on route to Michigan’s northernmost point, it struck me that Calumet is more than 500 miles away from Lansing, where state legislators make policy. Yet the notion of drafting statewide policies to govern school curriculum and practices in places as different as Lansing, the Upper Peninsula, and Detroit is rarely criticized as absurd.

The Michigan Merit Curriculum (MMC) became law in 2006, imposing a sweeping statewide expansion of graduation requirements that specified how many credits of math, science, language arts, social studies, and other courses students must take. State Superintendent Mike Flanagan promoted these expanded requirements at the time saying “[they] will evolve Michigan from being a Rust Belt, blue-collar state to being a high-tech and high-skills state.”

But preliminary data on the first wave of Michigan students subject to the new requirements should give policymakers pause. Since the MMC requirements were imposed, graduation rates have dropped and lower-achieving students have been hit the hardest.

The Michigan Education Research Consortium released data in October 2012 showing the five-year graduation rate for the lowest-achieving students declined by 5 percentage points after MMC went into effect. This is a large drop when only about half of the lowest-achieving students were making it to graduation beforehand.

The Michigan Merit Curriculum (MMC) became law in 2006, imposing a sweeping statewide expansion of graduation requirements that specified how many credits of math, science, language arts, social studies, and other courses students must take. State Superintendent Mike Flanagan promoted these expanded requirements at the time saying “[they] will evolve Michigan from being a Rust Belt, blue-collar state to being a high-tech and high-skills state.”

But preliminary data on the first wave of Michigan students subject to the new requirements should give policymakers pause. Since the MMC requirements were imposed, graduation rates have dropped and lower-achieving students have been hit the hardest.

It is easy to see Calumet and Detroit students have different needs, but the [Michigan Merit Curriculum] requirements apply regardless of student need, background, or local opportunities.”

“IT IS EASY TO SEE CALUMET AND DETROIT STUDENTS HAVE DIFFERENT NEEDS, BUT THE [MICHIGAN MERIT CURRICULUM] REQUIREMENTS APPLY REGARDLESS OF STUDENT NEED, BACKGROUND, OR LOCAL OPPORTUNITIES.”

By Audrey Spalding

Recently, on route to Michigan’s northernmost point, it struck me that Calumet is more than 500 miles away from Lansing, where state legislators make policy. Yet the notion of drafting statewide policies to govern school curriculum and practices in places as different as Lansing, the Upper Peninsula, and Detroit is rarely criticized as absurd.

The Michigan Merit Curriculum (MMC) became law in 2006, imposing a sweeping statewide expansion of graduation requirements that specified how many credits of math, science, language arts, social studies, and other courses students must take. State Superintendent Mike Flanagan promoted these expanded requirements at the time saying “[they] will evolve Michigan from being a Rust Belt, blue-collar state to being a high-tech and high-skills state.”

But preliminary data on the first wave of Michigan students subject to the new requirements should give policymakers pause. Since the MMC requirements were imposed, graduation rates have dropped and lower-achieving students have been hit the hardest.

The Michigan Education Research Consortium released data in October 2012 showing the five-year graduation rate for the lowest-achieving students declined by 5 percentage points after MMC went into effect. This is a large drop when only about half of the lowest-achieving students were making it to graduation beforehand.

The Michigan Merit Curriculum (MMC) became law in 2006, imposing a sweeping statewide expansion of graduation requirements that specified how many credits of math, science, language arts, social studies, and other courses students must take. State Superintendent Mike Flanagan promoted these expanded requirements at the time saying “[they] will evolve Michigan from being a Rust Belt, blue-collar state to being a high-tech and high-skills state.”

But preliminary data on the first wave of Michigan students subject to the new requirements should give policymakers pause. Since the MMC requirements were imposed, graduation rates have dropped and lower-achieving students have been hit the hardest.

It is easy to see Calumet and Detroit students have different needs, but the [Michigan Merit Curriculum] requirements apply regardless of student need, background, or local opportunities.”

“IT IS EASY TO SEE CALUMET AND DETROIT STUDENTS HAVE DIFFERENT NEEDS, BUT THE [MICHIGAN MERIT CURRICULUM] REQUIREMENTS APPLY REGARDLESS OF STUDENT NEED, BACKGROUND, OR LOCAL OPPORTUNITIES.”
Tenn. Governor, Parents Seek Vouchers

By Ashley Bateman

In January’s State of the State speech, Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam (R) outlined a proposal to let poor students zoned for low-performing public schools attend private schools using tax dollars.

The legislation has yet to hit the statehouse, but state Sen. Brian Kelsey (R-Germantown), who sponsored similar legislation in 2011, maintains his colleagues will pass it.

“Tennessee in recent years has tackled virtually every other education reform out there, from performance-based teacher evaluations to tenure reform to universal eligibility for charter schools,” Kelsey said. “Opportunity scholarships are the last major piece of the education reform puzzle.”

More Information, Please

In 2011, the state Senate passed Kelsey’s vouchers bill, but House members wanted further investigation. The findings of a 2012 task force Haslam commissioned have increased legislative support for the idea.

“Tennessee lawmakers are discussing how to focus education on what is best for children, rather than ‘what is best for the adults in a bureaucracy,’” Kelsey said. Vouchers “provide low-income children with the same opportunities that higher-income children already have to receive the quality education that they deserve. We know that opportunity scholarships increase graduation rates dramatically and have zero negative effect on public schools.”

“We feel inclined to believe that some type of voucher bill will pass this year,” said Mandy Rough, executive director of the Memphis Opportunity Scholarship Trust (MOST), which gives students private scholarships to attend their school of choice.

Life-Changing Options

Marilyn Johnson says the day she learned about MOST nine years ago has been life-changing for her son Marshall, who studies at St. George’s Independent School. Another MOST parent, who asked to remain anonymous because she teaches in a public school, lauded MOST for helping her daughter flourish.

“Our daughter is thriving in this new environment, and even her teacher acknowledges how she is excelling both academically and socially,” she said. “Within half a year’s time, she has grown tremendously in math and reading and is performing above grade level.”

Taxpayers spend approximately $10,000 for each urban Tennessee student.

“We have got to start worrying more about whether our students are learning than where they are learning,” he said.

Parent, Voter Support

A group of parents organized to oppose vouchers in Tennessee and received broad media attention, but polls indicate they don’t represent most voters or legislators.

Standing Together 4 Strong Community Schools, which represents most voters, favor vouchers. The poll found seven of ten parents favored vouchers. The percent who strongly favored vouchers was 27 points higher than those who strongly opposed.

Parents Value Choice

The poll also asked participants to state the reason for their responses.

“By far, the most common reason was that vouchers afforded choice, flexibility, freedom. Those kinds of terms really resonated as reasons for supporting vouchers,” said Paul DiPerna, the Friedman Foundation’s research director. “There were other less frequently offered impressions; such as [a voucher] helps the less fortunate, provides better quality of education. … There were also negative [concerns about] abuse or fraud, [and] hurting the public schools, but they were in a distinct minority compared to those who responded positively.”

Virginia Legislator Revives ‘Tebow Bill’

Kansas State quarterback Collin Klein almost emulated Tim Tebow as a homeschool graduate who won the Heisman Trophy for college football excellence. Klein placed third in this season’s Heisman voting. If state Sen. Tom Garrett (R-Lynchburg) gets his way, Virginia may cultivate more Tebows and Kleins.

Garrett has revived a bill to let homeschool students play public school sports, which failed by one vote in Virginia’s Senate last year. The state’s superintendents association and teachers union have opposed similar bills introduced since 2005. They say homeschoolers can’t prove their classes and grades are credible, and homeschooled athletes therefore don’t meet the same academic standards as public school athletes.

The Garrett bill requires homeschoolers to meet their public school team’s academic requirements for two years before they can join. Virginia Gov. Bob McDowell supports the bill. Spokesman Jeff Caldwell said, “Homeschool families are members of the community and pay the same taxes as families who send their children to public schools.”

Tebow grew up playing in Florida, and Klein in Colorado. Those are two of 18 states that currently allow homeschoolers to try out for public school teams.

“By far, the most common reason was that vouchers afforded choice, flexibility, freedom. Those kinds of terms really resonated as reasons for supporting vouchers,” said Paul DiPerna, the Friedman Foundation’s research director. “There were other less frequently offered impressions; such as [a voucher] helps the less fortunate, provides better quality of education. … There were also negative [concerns about] abuse or fraud, [and] hurting the public schools, but they were in a distinct minority compared to those who responded positively.”

Traditional public schools exclude parents from real decisions over their children’s education, such as what to teach, where to attend school, and how much to pay for it, Reed said.

Parents have begun to tell legislators they want school choice, said Brent Easley, Tennessee state director for StudentsFirst, a national school choice advocacy group.

“The public’s support is at our back,” he said. “We have thousands of members in our organization, and our numbers are growing in Tennessee.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
New English Speakers Need Phonics, Syntax

By Patrick Herrera

After teaching Spanish for many years, I was asked by my school district to teach English as a Second Language. Teaching Spanish, I was told, meant teaching a second language, so the process should be similar. It wasn’t.

I didn’t realize the demographics of the learners would present such a profound teaching challenge. My new challenge was a middle school with students who were born here, students arriving from Spanish-speaking countries, plus some from Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. The biggest surprise was the 10 percent, or more, of new arrivals, mostly from Mexico and Central America, who had never been in a classroom. They were placed in regular ESL classes that presumed some literacy in their own language, which they did not have.

It was soon evident my students faced a variety of inhibitors to learning English. The curriculum materials on hand did not address the deficiencies of students with low primary literacy, which most of my students were. I began to investigate the problems on my own. It resulted in years of classroom research, a return to graduate school, and a degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages/ Applied Linguistics.

New Language vs. Second Language

My field research took me into how people acquire language. This included phonics, phonetics, and various aspects of vocabulary and syntax.

Syntax was an especially interesting area. To the grammarian it refers to proper word forms and word sequence. It also means internalizing syntax, or “thinking in the language.” Current instructional materials do not offer specific instruction in this area, yet the research generally makes it clear the ESL teacher would benefit from understanding basic linguistics regarding language acquisition.

English presents different problems for native speakers of Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, and so forth. Teachers with an understanding of language acquisition and a methodical rationale for instruction quickly discover these inhibitors and can then work to remove them. My classroom research became the basis for my thesis (see accompanying figure), which can guide lesson plans, units of instruction, and curriculum for a semester.

As I moved on from K-12 public schools, this visual structure also provided a basis for instruction in graduate-level teacher training courses I have taught at four southern California universities.

The graph represents how students learn basic elements of languages. It targets syntax for second language learners. Standard textbooks do not directly address this area, but it is the key to “thinking in English,” which is the gateway to literacy.

Phonics Instruction Essential

Phonics skills are sometimes referred to as “alphabetics.” These skills create the cognitive link between the sounds a person hears and their written counterparts on a page. Converting words on a page to speech is the skill of “decoding” that is so familiar to teachers.

Decoding, however, is often mistaken for reading. It does not ensure comprehension; it just means a person knows how the letters in words sound together. As the figure indicates, people then need to learn what words mean, or vocabulary, a controversial topic among researchers.

One point of agreement is the need to learn vocabulary in context. Even the simplest words change meanings and connotations in different contexts. Linking a single meaning to a word will cause comprehension problems later. Lists of random vocabulary hardly help students.

This is where the challenge of syntax comes in. The order in which a listener receives cues that convey meaning in a sentence is different from language to language.

For example, sentences in English use subject nouns or pronouns in all sentences: The “he” in “He walked to the store.” Spanish omits subject nouns and pronouns most of the time: The “he” is implied, but not stated, in “Camina para la tienda.” Also, the pronoun “it” is very common in English, but doesn’t exist in Spanish. There are many such differences between English and other languages. To digest these requires understanding the syntax of the new language, rather than learning rules and applying them individually.

Two other elements in the figure show speaking follows listening. Listening is the basis for reading, and speaking is the foundation for writing. But none of these works well when new English learners have not received explicit instruction in the largely missing ingredient: syntax.

Patrick Herrera (pherrera@phonictoliteracy.com) is an adjunct faculty member of Chapman University and founder of ESL Phonics to Literacy.
THE ABCs OF SCHOOL CHOICE

The comprehensive guide to every private school choice program in America

“There isn’t a doubt in my mind that Jaevion is exactly where he needs to be in order to thrive academically and mature spiritually, and it’s all possible because of the voucher program.” - Jeronna, whose son, Jaevion, is participating in Indiana’s Choice Scholarship Program

2013 EDITION NOW AVAILABLE

To request your copy visit edchoice.org/ABCs

FRIEDMAN FOUNDATION FOR EDUCATIONAL CHOICE