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Texas Savings Grant Program Could Save Billions

By Ashley Bateman

Senate Bill 276 aims to expand opportunities for Texas students through the use of vouchers, and it may become law this session after years of setbacks.

Texas state Sen. Donna Campbell (R-Comal County) has introduced the Taxpayer Savings Grant Program (TSGP) in previous sessions, and she is bolstering the argument in support of school choice with new cost-savings research.

The Texas Economy and School Choice, a study released in January commissioned by the Texas Association of Business and Texas Public Policy Foundation, analyzed TSGP and found allowing for statewide school choice would reduce the dropout rate, close

By Heather Kays

Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker (R), a front-runner in the contest for the Republican nomination for president, made bold reforms of elementary, secondary, and college education a prominent part of his proposed 2015–17 budget.

The budget, presented on February 3, would remove the cap on the state’s school choice program, eliminate state funding for Smarter Balanced tests tied to Common Core State Standards, and cut $300 million from the University of Wisconsin (UW) over two years in exchange for greater autonomy for the system.

Nick Novak, communications director at the MacIver Institute, says Walker’s budget would beneficially disrupt the educational status quo and promote school choice.

“There is no shortage of bold education reforms in Gov. Walker’s 2015–17 budget proposal,” Novak said.

Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker addresses the Iowa Freedom Summit in January.

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Chalkboard

North Carolina Voucher Suit
A lawsuit challenging North Carolina’s school voucher program will reach the North Carolina Supreme Court this year.

Big Teacher-Prep Problems
Teacher education programs are drawing scrutiny from government agencies and nonprofit agencies in light of increasing accusations of inadequacy.

Attacks on For-Profit charters
Defenders of the status quo are on the attack against for-profit charter schools, but the latter constitute a relatively small proportion of charter schools.

Case against Common Core
Heartland Institute Science Director Jay Lehr reviews The Story-Killers: A Common Sense Case Against the Common Core.

Ohio Parent Trigger Trap
Ohio officials made little effort to inform parents of a parent trigger pilot program, an apparent effort to make the case parents don’t want the trigger option.

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Oklahoma Bill Champions K–12 ESAs — 9

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California School Uses Parent Trigger, District Spreads Rumors

By Chris Neal

Parents in Anaheim, California are using the state’s parent trigger law to turn a chronically underperforming elementary school into a charter school.

In California, parents can trigger reforms if a school remains in one of the state’s lowest-rated tiers for a set period, even after some corrective action has already taken place. If a school like Palm Lane Elementary fails to improve, parents can initiate one of the options granted by the trigger law if more than 50 percent of parents sign a petition. In the case of Palm Lane, two-thirds signed on. The parents submitted the petition on January 14.

The California parent trigger law gives parents several options, including closing the school or replacing the administration. At Palm Lane, parents elected to enact the restart option, which closes the school and reopens it under a charter operator.

Ignored, Intimidated, Discriminated

Magdalena Romero is one of the parents who supported activating the trigger.

“We have been ignored, intimidated, and discriminated for years, going to every school meeting, attending board meetings, etc.,” said Romero, who has a sixth grader at Palm Lane.

“They are listening because of the power of the parent trigger law. So let me make it very clear, all we want and have been requesting for years is for an education for our kids that will give them the skills and knowledge [they need] so they can attend college.”

“We want them to have the same opportunities that Palm Lane teachers, the Anaheim City School District Board, and Superintendent Wagner have,” said Romero. “We want our kids to live the American dream.”

The elementary school attempted a turnaround in 2013, bringing in Roberto Baeza as its new principal. Baeza had improved underperforming schools in the past. Although he was popular with parents, the board reassigned Baeza to another school, which pushed parents to try another option, according to former state Sen. Gloria Romero (D-East Los Angeles).

Successful Implementation

California has led the way in the implementation of parent trigger reforms. Desert Trails Elementary was the first to turn its school into a charter, which it accomplished in 2013. Since then, the percentage of fifth graders scoring proficient or above in science has risen from 12 percent in the 2012–13 school year to 47 percent the following year, according to Ben Boychuk, a policy advisor for The Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News.

Former state Sen. Gloria Romero, who wrote California’s parent trigger law in 2010, continues to voice her support for school reform. She is not related to parent Magdalena Romero. “Parents didn’t want their kids in a chronically failing school,” said Sen. Romero. “This is an eligible school for transformation. It hasn’t turned around. Parents finally said, ‘we’re not taking it any longer.’”

Sen. Romero says when she wrote the law, she knew parents would read it carefully. “I wrote the law with this type of spirit in mind,” Sen. Romero said. “I wrote it knowing parents would fight for their kids. I did so because education is the civil rights issue of our time.”

Letters, Robocalls, False Claims

Magdalena Romero says the school board made efforts to destroy the reputation of parent trigger activists. She says Anaheim City School District Board Superintendent Linda Wagner issued letters and robocalls to parents throughout the district, claiming organizers were misleading parents and bribing them with free iPads.

“We had never [before] seen a superintendent on a district letterhead send a letter making false claims to parents,” said Romero. “Not only that, they sent out recorded calls to parents warning them not to sign, all based on false information.

“We believe that this is a misuse of taxpayer dollars,” Romero said. “Parents will have to take it to the California State Board of Education and demand it enforce its own regulations.”

Alfonso Flores, lead organizer of the parent trigger effort, praised Palm Lane parents’ determination.

“They have kids in sixth grade who can’t read,” Flores said. “They have fifth graders who can barely do math. You want the parents to be engaged, but the kids are being sent home with no homework.

“These are working-class families,” said Flores. “These parents want better for their kids, and the district has just ignored them. The parents had questions, and nobody was listening. I’m pretty sure they are listening now.”

Chris Neal (cdobro245@gmail.com) writes from New York, New York.
Texas Savings Grant Program Could Save Billions

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educational achievement gaps between races and income levels, and would increase education performance.

Though Texas has experienced economic prosperity in recent years, the education landscape reflects little improvement. Student enrollment has surpassed the state’s ability to find seats for them in classes, and new schools are built between rows of portable classrooms. A small private school market and a statewide charter school cap also limit the availability of schools.

Economic Advantages of Choice
TSGP is a budget reform proposal and would be administered by the state Comptroller’s office rather than the Texas Education Agency.

Under the program, any parent or legal guardian of a school-age child who is entering kindergarten or attended a public school for the prior academic year could receive reimbursement from the state for tuition paid for enrolling that child in a private school. The reimbursement would be in the amount of actual tuition paid or 60 percent of the state average per-pupil spending, whichever is less.

Researchers currently estimate TSGP will save $2 billion over five years and $22 billion over 12 years, says Kent Grusendorf, senior fellow and director of the Center for Education Freedom at the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

According to the study, reform would increase Texas’s GDP and standard of living by 17 to 30 percent.

“Most people haven’t connected the dots between the constant increase in property taxes and spending in the public school system,” said Matthew Ladner, senior advisor of policy and research at the Foundation for Excellence in Education. “Property taxes have increased much more than academic improvement in the state.”

“We spend billions every year on policies and laws to support the American dream, but it’s all focused in the adult world. We [need to] focus equal opportunity at the child’s level. It’s the cheapest, most efficient, most common-sense [way to provide] equal education opportunity.”

DONNA CAMPBELL
STATE SENATOR
COMAL COUNTY, TEXAS

Likelihood of Passage
“The Texas legislature has a cautious streak to it, which has not served it well in K–12 reform,” said Ladner. “Texas was once a leader in K–12 reform, but it no longer is. You can see the results of this in the national report card scores, where Texas made some admirable gains but has plateaued over the past decade, especially in reading.”

Former Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst (R) and current Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick (R) issued joint statements in favor of school reform and charter school growth early in Dewhurst’s term, but major changes in education policy have yet to be enacted.

Grusendorf says new leadership elected into office since the last legislative session is favorable for the program’s passage.

“There are a lot of great lawmakers this session who would like to support all ideas for school kids,” Campbell said. “A lot of them realize we have to do something different. The current model is just not suited for all school children and parents should have a choice.”

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INTERNET INFO

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.
Senators Struggle to Rewrite No Child Left Behind

By Diana-Ashley Krach

After six years and 24 hearings, two prominent U.S. senators have agreed to restart their drafting of a bipartisan bill to fix the George W. Bush-era national education law No Child Left Behind.

Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN), chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, introduced a discussion draft in January. Alexander and Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA) have continuously worked since on shaping the reauthorization bill.

In early February, Alexander and Murray agreed to discard Alexander’s original discussion draft and start fresh, according to Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom. Although the senators have made progress on the reauthorization bill, McCluskey says it would still authorize far more federal involvement in education than is advisable.

“Generally speaking, the [No Child Left Behind] rewrite is going in the right direction by reducing federal micromanagement of K–12 education,” said McCluskey. “But just because you take a correct turn doesn’t mean you’re where you need to go. There is no compelling evidence that No Child Left Behind, and federal intervention overall, has produced much good, while it is very clear it has cost substantial money and is unconstitutional. So the federal government should be removed from education except in Washington, DC, on federal lands, and in prohibiting state and local discrimination in providing education.”

Alexander’s original draft proposal would have allowed states to decide if they want to adopt Common Core standards. Alexander said during a speech the purpose of the draft proposal was to “restore freedom to parents, teachers, states, governors, other school experts and local communities so that they can improve their local public schools.

“Unfortunately, while the direction of the No Child Left Behind rewrite seems to be to curb federal overreach such as coercing states to adopt specific standards, or adequate yearly progress demands, it seems likely that whatever finally passes will maintain annual testing requirements using statewide standards, retain many categorical programs of highly dubious value, and keep a major federal presence,” McCluskey said. “That would be better than where we are right now, but not nearly good enough.”

Determining Testing Requirements

Among issues Alexander and Murray may discuss is what type of testing, if any, should be required as part of the reauthorization bill.

Michael Brickman, national policy director for the Fordham Institute, says some form of testing is necessary for tracking student development and informing parents and other concerned parties of their school’s success.

“Assessments exist now that didn’t exist before No Child Left Behind [was created],” said Brickman. “There is a different landscape now. There is a greater understanding of what the assessments are capable of, what they can and cannot do.”

MICHAEL BRICKMAN, NATIONAL POLICY DIRECTOR, FORDHAM INSTITUTE


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Wisconsin’s Walker Raises Bar on Education Reform

Continued from page 1

“His plan lifts the caps on the statewide school choice program, ensures successful independent charter schools will be able to expand outside the city of Milwaukee, and makes it clear that no school district in the state is required to implement the federal Common Core standards.

“Gov. Walker has shown once again the status quo in education is not good enough for him or for our students,” said Novak. “Predatably, the teachers unions are upset the governor wants to end their monopoly over our children’s education.”

‘A Moral Imperative’

“Every child—regardless of their ZIP code—should have access to a great education,” Laurel Patrick, press secretary for Walker, said in an email. “It is a moral imperative. Providing our children with a quality education will equip them with the necessary skills to thrive later in life.”

State Sen. Paul Farrow (R-Pewaukee) says he is happy to see so many positive changes to education policy in Walker’s budget.

“I look forward to working with my colleagues on the Joint Finance Committee to fine-tune this proposal and make it workable for Wisconsin’s students and parents,” Farrow said. “For nearly 35 years, [the] school choice [program] has been a very effective and successful program in Milwaukee, and the legislature has seen fit to expand its use to Racine, and just last year to a statewide program.

“I am pleased to see the governor propose a lifting of the cap to allow more students and families to take advantage of our choice programs,” said Farrow. “The governor has rightly explained that 3,407 students have applied to fill 1,000 available seats in the Parental Choice Program. Demand for educational options has greatly outgrown what is available. A lifting of the cap is needed to provide the education these students are clamoring for.”

Changing the UW System

“[The proposed $300 million cut to the UW system would be] a one-time biennial cut in exchange for freedom and flexibility into the future,” said Patrick.

Walker spoke about UW during his budget address on February 3.

“For years, supporters of the University of Wisconsin system said freeing them of being directly under the state government bureaucracy would help reduce costs in multiple areas for the system,” Walker said. “This budget includes a bold proposal to provide new governance through an authority, similar to the one used for UW Hospital and Clinics.

“Recently, some have raised concerns about this proposed reform,” Walker said. “These are some of the same claims we heard four years ago when our Act 10 reforms were enacted. Today, our graduation rates are higher, third grade reading scores are better, and Wisconsin ACT scores are [the] second best in the country.

“With this in mind, I ask the legislature to give our bold reform idea a serious look,” Walker said.

Trading Money for Freedom

Novak says the freedom UW would gain would be well worth the cut in funding.

“The University of Wisconsin system would see some much-needed reforms if the governor’s budget plan stays intact,” said Novak. “By separating the UW system from state government bureaucracy and creating its own authority, it would be able to find much-needed efficiencies.”

“[The proposed reforms to the UW system] would transform higher education in this state for the future by empowering leaders, protecting taxpayers, and promoting long-term stability,” said Patrick.

Patrick and Novak note the proposed cut is a small portion of the total $6.1 billion allotted for the UW system for 2014–15.

“The plan would allow the public university system to better serve its students by giving it more flexibility over management and budgetary decisions,” said Novak. “In exchange for greater autonomy, the UW system would see a 2.5 percent cut to its overall public funding, equivalent to $150 million a year.

“This will hopefully start a true conversation about the size and scope of every two- and four-year public university in the state,” Novak said. “Wisconsin’s students deserve a great university system, but taxpayers should not serve as a blank check so the university can be all things to everyone. The UW system should focus on preparing young adults to compete in a global economy, and that’s all taxpayers should be expected to fund.”

Heather Kays (hkays@heartland.org) is a research fellow with The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
Illinois Legislators Resume Work on Student Privacy

By Tom Gantert

A recently passed Illinois law aimed at eliminating cyberbullying could allow schools to demand students reveal social media passwords, and some state legislators are now working to pass reforms to prevent unnecessary privacy violations.

In 2013, state Rep. Mike Fortner (R-West Chicago) sponsored House Bill 64, which eventually passed and requires school officials to inform parents before asking students for social media passwords.

Fortner says the law was intended to increase protection of student privacy, and that before it passed, school districts had no restrictions on what private information related to social media could be demanded from students.

“Anyone could say, ‘You have to turn over your password,’” Fortner said. “They could insist on that.”

A state law passed in 2012 prohibited employers from requiring employees to turn over their Facebook passwords. Legislators revised the law after learning federal regulations required employees in certain jobs, such as financial services, to give their employers their Facebook passwords.

Compromising Over Student Privacy

“We saw there were no regulations stopping schools from asking for this information,” Fortner said.

Fortner says some school officials found the original language in the bill to be overly restrictive, so legislators and school officials reached a compromise requiring school officials to have “reasonable cause” to believe a student violated school disciplinary policy before demanding a student’s passwords. School officials were also required to notify parents of social media password policies.

“[HB 64] restricted what schools could do before they could do anything,” Fortner said. “If you are using or working on a college server, they have a right to see what you are doing.”

In 2014, a bill passed requiring school districts to create an official policy on how to address cyberbullying. That bill, House Bill 4207, became effective January 1, 2015.

A school district in Illinois in 2014 determined the best way to comply with the cyberbullying law would be to send notifications to parents indicating school personnel could demand Facebook passwords from students if a case of cyberbullying existed.

“This is how the school district responded to the new cyberbullying law,” Fortner said. Fortner says the school officials thought asking for student passwords would be acceptable if they gave parents prior notification.

Defining ‘Probable Cause’

Fortner is now working on legislation to clarify the meaning of “reasonable cause.” He says the definition will probably involve there being a specific complaint filed.

“You don’t want them going fishing,” said Fortner. “There should be a real event going on.”

Khaliyah Barnes, an expert on student privacy and director of the Student Privacy Project for the Electronic Privacy Information Center, called HB 64 “relatively weak.” The term “reasonable cause” being undefined created a large loophole, Barnes says.

“Right now, that is such a nebulous term,” said Barnes.

Barnes says Illinois law should require a warrant in order for school officials to demand password information, and that Illinois law doesn’t place any meaningful limits on a school district’s ability to demand social media passwords.

“When it appears that the legislature was attempting to place some form of limit on social media monitoring, this law doesn’t do that,” Barnes said. “They need to have meaningful safeguards. This law, if reworked, has the potential to put some meaningful safeguards in place.”

Barnes says the existing law provides no privacy protections at all for students who use school resources.

“Consider a student writing home [on a school computer] to her parents and telling them about a medical issue,” Barnes said. “That is incredibly broad. We can’t have our students in a surveillance state, and social media monitoring encourages that.”

‘Tantamount to a Wiretap’

Lee Tien, senior staff attorney for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, says some of the media stories about the Illinois law are “misleading.”

“It’s not actually clear to us that there’s any authorization for schools to demand the passwords,” Tien said.

“The law requires them to notify parents/students that they might demand, but we didn’t actually see anything in the law that affirmatively states, ‘Schools may demand passwords and may punish students if they don’t comply.’

“This is important because getting passwords is an enormous privacy violation,” said Tien. “It’s the raw power to look at everything in your account, and so no court would or should read the law expansively. Courts should read the law narrowly. It’s tantamount to a wiretap.”

Tien says most social media terms of service warn against giving away a password to someone else.

“So a school would be putting kids in a very weird position of violating terms of service, and it’s possible that a school that used the password would be violating the terms of service as well, since it’s someone else’s account,” said Tien.

Tom Gantert (gantert@mackinac.org) is senior capitol correspondent for Michigan Capitol Confidential, a daily news site of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.

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Illinois General Assembly Bill HB0064


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**N.C. Vouchers Challenge to Reach State’s High Court**

By Chris Neal

A lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of North Carolina’s school voucher program will reach the North Carolina Supreme Court this year.

Low-income students in the state will still be able to enroll in the program through the 2015–16 school year while the court hears challenges from education establishment organizations such as the North Carolina Association of Educators and the North Carolina School Boards Association.

Voucher opponents’ principal argument is scholarships are taking funds away from public schools. Darrell Allison, president of Parents/Partners for Educational Freedom in North Carolina, says the claim is not accurate.

“The Opportunity Scholarships are paid for with funds from the state’s General Fund, not from money allocated for public education,” Allison said. “Money is not being taken away from the public schools.”

Doran Moreland, state programs and government relations director at the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, says families wanting to apply for the program should follow the case closely.

“There’s no question that the Opportunity Scholarships are extremely popular,” said Moreland. “About 30 percent of North Carolina families qualify. If [the supreme court rules] they are constitutional, families will have to get their kids enrolled as soon as possible,” Moreland said. “Other states are also watching to see what the court will do.”

Chris Neal (edbro245@gmail.com) writes from New York, New York.

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Teachers Versus the Public: What Americans Think about Schools and How to Fix Them

Paul E. Peterson, Michael Henderson and Martin R. West

(Brookings Institution Press, 2014)

**Vouchers May Lead to Lasting Positive Outcomes**

By Heather Kays


The results of the study should lead to more support for school choice options, Chingos says.

In their study “Experimentally Estimated Impacts of School Vouchers on College Enrollment and Degree Attainment,” Chingos and Peterson wrote, “We provide the first experimental estimates of the long-term impacts of a voucher to attend private school by linking data from a privately sponsored voucher initiative in New York City, which awarded the scholarships by lottery to low-income families, to administrative records on college enrollment and degree attainment.”

Chingos and Peterson say the study shows minority students benefited the most from the voucher program.

“We looked at some subgroups of students, and that’s where we saw positive impacts,” said Chingos. The study “shows significantly positive voucher impacts for the children of African American mothers by 6 percentage points on college enrollment on a base enrollment rate of 42 percent.”

Among the same group of students, more minority students who received the vouchers obtained a bachelor’s degree than students who did not receive a voucher.

Chingos says he wanted to answer the question, “Did getting a voucher back in the 1990s have an impact on the likelihood of students succeeding?”

**Small Vouchers, Surprising Impact**

The data Chingos and Peterson used came from the New York School Choice Scholarships Foundation Program (http://www.nyschoolchoice.org), which in the spring of 1997 offered three-year scholarships worth a maximum of $1,400 annually to as many as 1,000 low-income families.

The children who received the vouchers either were entering first grade or were public school students about to enter grades 2 through 5. A recipient could attend any one of the hundreds of private schools, religious or secular, in the city of New York.

“I think we were surprised to find any impact at all. It was a very small voucher,” said Chingos.

Chingos says it’s unreasonable to put too much weight on any one study, but there is clear enough evidence to support additional school choice programs.

“I think it says that we ought to continue to experiment with school choice,” said Chingos. “These are some promising results. It shows more research and experiment is warranted.”

Heather Kays (hkays@heartland.org) is a research fellow with The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
By Bruce Edward Walker

For the second year in a row, legislators in Oklahoma are seeking to implement education savings accounts (ESAs) in the state.

If passed, the bill would give resident parents and legal guardians of eligible Oklahoma children access to state-apportioned education dollars. The monies would be deposited by the state treasurer into newly established ESAs for parents to pay for their children’s enrollment in virtual or private schools.

Oklahoma House Bill 2003 was introduced January 20, 2015 by state Rep. Jason Nelson (R-Oklahoma City) and sponsored by 14 other legislators, including state Sen. Clark Jolley (R-Edmond). The bill is similar to House Bill 3398, which was introduced by Nelson in 2014.

Although HB 3398 failed to leave committee in 2014, Nelson says HB 2003 stands a better chance because the new crop of freshman legislators elected in November 2014 is likely to support policies that will increase school choice.

“It’s the same bill but it’s a different climate,” Nelson said.

Empowering Parents’ Decisions

The Oklahoma Education Savings Account Act (OESAA) builds on two prior policy adjustments to how public education is paid for in the state. The first was a 2010 state program that provides vouchers to special-needs children. The second, instituted in 2011, is a scholarship program for students from low-income households.

OESAA states, “The purpose of [OESAA] is to provide additional educational options to parents for the education of students in this state, by creating education accounts for individual students empowering parents to make educational decisions for their children.”

If enacted, ESAs would be first offered during the 2015–16 school year. Nelson says HB 2003 wasn’t drafted to penalize the public school system in Oklahoma but instead results from a January 2014 Friedman Foundation study, which concluded a majority of Oklahomans favored tax-credit scholarships.

Teachers unions in the state have attacked HB 2003, calling it another voucher program designed to take more money out of public schools. Nelson doesn’t entirely disagree with the charge.

“If passed, we’ll provide a wider array of options other than what people perceive as traditional vouchers,” Nelson said. “What we’re talking about isn’t revolutionary. Oklahoma already offers similar programs for Medicaid, food stamps, and higher-education tuition assistance. The only place we don’t do this is for kids between the ages of 5 and 18.”

Bruce Edward Walker (bwalker@heartland.org) is a policy advisor for The Heartland Institute.
Scholarships for Disabled Students Likely to Be Passed in Mississippi

By Ashley Bateman

Data accumulated in 2012 reveals nearly 55,000 students aged 6–21 were determined to have disabilities, and less than 30 percent of students receiving special education services graduated high school with a diploma, according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) website.

Education experts say public schools are failing to deliver the necessary quality services needed to help disabled students graduate.

Data and personal stories prompted Mississippi state Sen. Nancy Collins (R-Tupelo) to formulate legislation that would allow parents of disabled children to have more control over their children’s education options. Collins is just one of several legislators proposing legal changes to support disabled students this session after a voucher-like program failed to materialize in 2014.

Bills on the Table

Senate Bill 2695, broadly mislabeled a voucher effort, is a bipartisan effort that would create education scholarship accounts for qualified families. Under the bill, parents would have access to $7,000 to customize their child’s education. Parents can use funds toward tuition at eligible private schools and for therapy, online courses, and with vendors approved by a nonprofit agency selected by the Mississippi Department of Education (MDOE).

Nearly identical to SB 2695 is a House version of the bill introduced by state Rep. Carolyn Crawford (R-Harrison County) that allows for MDOE to approve vendors directly.

The Senate bill would draw funds from the state’s general fund and not divert money from public school districts or the Mississippi Adequate Education Program.

Opponents of the Senate bill, such as the Parents Campaign of Mississippi (PCM), say they are concerned state funds will primarily end up in private schools. PCM leaders support instead the Special Education Improvement Act of 2015, which would require a redistribution of education funds and the revamping of allocation streams for schools across the state. Special education funding would become a separate line item in the state’s budget under the bill approved by PCM, and a new fund for disabled students to access additional authorized services would be established as well.

“In the past, the Parents Campaign has always fought what would give parents more choice or control,” said Grant Callen, president of Empower Mississippi, a grassroots effort to expand educational choice in the state. “It’s very perplexing. [It] takes more than just increasing the dollars to a particular area to solve a problem. The beauty of the special needs [education savings account] program is it changes the person who is actually making decisions for a child.”

A separate House bill was proposed to increase legal services for special education students, but it is garnering less attention. The bill’s opponents say students with disabilities already have legal protections in the state’s education system.

“There are already supposed to be attorneys supporting school districts,” Collins said. “I don’t think that will have much traction.”

Not a Voucher Bill

Multiple states have made attempts to improve their special education programs in recent years, and many have been successful when parents are empowered to make decisions for their children.

One of the most successful programs is the McKay Scholarship Program in Florida, which is the longest-running statewide choice system in the nation for students with disabilities. Patricia Levesque, the chief executive officer and founder of the Foundation for Excellence in Education, says the McKay program has proven effective on many levels.

“[P]arental satisfaction [surveys show] … satisfaction increased just because they had options for their children, whether the student exercised their choice or not,” Levesque said. “Other research found that the actual performance of disabled students increased when there were more private school choice options in the geographic vicinity around that public school. School accountability and parental choice programs have led the country in gains of students with disabilities in the public school system as demonstrated on [the National Assessment of Educational Progress].”

Although big-name groups like PCM have said SB 2695 does so, the bill does not direct funds to private schools, instead putting money in the hands of parents through the use of education savings accounts (ESAs).

Levesque says ESAs do more than empower parents to personally design an education that meets their child’s needs. “The other concept with ESAs is to not only make annual decisions, but longer-term decisions,” said Levesque.

Careful Crafting

According to Collins, putting strong accountability measures in place was a top priority when crafting the bill.

“The state’s [Department of Finance and Administration] will manage the debit card used by the parents, and the MDOE will contract with a qualified [nonprofit organization],” said Collins. “All scholarship accounts will be audited annually and randomly.”

When parents do not use all of the available funds, the money returns to the state. Parents who use funds on unauthorized expenses will lose their program eligibility.

Callen says parents have flooded social media in an effort to urge their legislators to support bills that would improve their special-needs children’s education outcomes.

“I am very encouraged about the likelihood of the Senate or House version of SB 2695 to pass,” Callen said.

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

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Kansas Schools Sue State over Education Funding

By Bruce Edward Walker

If the decision of an appellate court panel stands, Kansas taxpayers will be the biggest losers in a funding battle between public schools and state lawmakers. The Topeka Capital-Journal reports a three-judge panel ruled school funding in Kansas is so low that it violates the state’s constitution, although the judges declined to set a specific funding standard the state must be held to. Suggestions offered by the Shawnee County District Court judges in their 100-page decision could cost state taxpayers between $548 million and $771 million per year.

“The lawsuit over school funding in Kansas has nothing to do with the amount that schools need to provide a good education,” said Dave Trabert, president of the Kansas Policy Institute, a free-market think tank in Wichita. “It is all about entitlement. Every school efficiency audit has determined that schools could provide services at better prices, but most of the recommendations have been ignored. School districts and their lawyers believe they are entitled to operate inefficiently if they choose. School district financial reports also show that over $400 million of state and local aid has been used to increase cash reserves.”

Appeal Expected

The state is expected to appeal to the Kansas Supreme Court, which previously ruled, “[C]ost studies are more akin to estimates than the certainties the [lower court] suggested.” The Kansas Supreme Court also has declared the first test of funding adequacy ought to be whether students are meeting the so-called Rose standards, minimum education outcomes required by many state courts to meet constitutional guarantees for public education.

 “[The Rose standards have forced many school districts] to admit that they do not know how to define or measure performance … yet they claim to not have enough funding to meet the standards,” Trabert said.

“The district court ignored the supreme court’s instructions on how to measure adequacy in their recent order to increase funding by at least $548 million, so we are hopeful that the supreme court will again reject the lower court ruling on appeal,” Trabert said.

Ambiguous Laws

Jason C. Gay, a freelance policy analyst and attorney from Cheyenne, Wyoming, concurs with Trabert.

“The panel’s decision in Kansas highlights the danger of ambiguity in laws,” Gay said. “This is especially true when the ambiguity lies in the state constitution. Kansas requires the legislature to ‘make suitable provision for finance of the educational interest of the state.’ There is ambiguity as to what defines the educational interest of the state, and what suitable finance of those interests would be.

“The result is that the courts, not the voters, their elected representatives, or the governor determines the answers to these questions,” said Gay. “People need to consider a court case that upset them, a result they disagree with, and ask themselves if they want the judge or judges in that case to determine what adequate funding of their children’s school looks like.”

Gay says the trend of settling local school funding issues through litigation ultimately results in the loss of local control over the schools.

“Ideally, schools are locally controlled, in order to give the people with the most at stake, the parents and community, the greatest amount of control possible,” Gay said. “As with everything else, control in education follows funding. As the funding moves to the state or federal government, control follows.

“Locally funded schools have no need to redress funding issues by suing the state in court,” said Gay. “Funding issues give us an opportunity to examine how comfortable we are with centralized control and the potential problems that arise when we become more reliant on federal funding for our schools as the national debt continues to rise.”

‘Accountable to the People’

Data indicate no correlation exists between school funding and quality of education. For example, New Jersey had the nation’s third-highest per-pupil spending as of June 2014, but it was in the bottom half of states in high school graduation rate. Rhode Island comes in eighth in spending and is near the bottom third of states in graduation rate.

No state spends less than Utah per pupil, yet only nine states have higher graduation rates.

“These important decisions about how to appropriate and spend scarce public resources are best made through a process that is both deliberative and directly accountable to the people,” said Ben DeGrow, senior education policy analyst at the Independence Institute.

DeGrow says the Colorado Supreme Court ruled in 2013 against a suit similar to the case in Kansas that would have forced the state to pay an extra $2 billion on K–12 education, which already receives approximately 40 percent of the state’s general-fund dollars. DeGrow says had the courts imposed such a mandate, compliance would have required a combination of cuts to other state budget items and asking voters to pay additional taxes.

“Interestingly enough, we got a pretty clear answer to that later in 2013, when 65 percent of Colorado voters rejected a billion-dollar tax hike for schools,” said DeGrow. “Most voters remain unconvinced that new dollars would reach the classroom and directly benefit students and that funds would be distributed fairly. Fortunately, we have the opportunity to resolve disputes and make needed policy changes through our elected legislators and school boards, not through the courts.”

Bruce Edward Walker (bwalker@heartland.org) is a policy advisor for The Heartland Institute.
Florida Scholarship Program Survives Another Suit

By Chris Neal

Florida’s tax-credit scholarship program scored another legal victory against one of the lawsuits filed by the state’s largest teachers union in an ongoing battle over the program.

At the end of December 2014, Florida Circuit Chief Judge Charles Francis tossed out a suit challenging the expansion of the scholarship program that created “personal learning scholarship accounts” for students with special needs. The lawsuit was similar to another lawsuit dismissed earlier in 2014 by a state court.

The suit, filed by Florida Education Association (FEA) member Tom Faasse, claimed the program violates state law by siphoning money away from traditional public schools. At the time this issue of School Reform News went to press, FEA had made public no plans to challenge this portion of the scholarship program again, but another lawsuit challenging the program as a whole has not yet been decided on by a court.

Bill Mattox, a resident fellow at the James Madison Institute in Florida, says although the court dismissed one lawsuit, the fight over school choice programs will continue.

“The FEA has been attacking the tax-credit scholarship program with two different lawsuits,” Mattox said. “The one the courts threw out [for a second time] in December [2014] was always believed to be a weaker case. The FEA has abandoned that case and has said it won’t try again on it. Regrettably, the FEA is continuing to pursue the other lawsuit.”

The pending lawsuit is a constitutional case, whereas the one FEA abandoned was a legislative procedure case, Mattox noted.

Draining Public Money?
The pending suit argues the scholarship program is unconstitutional. Opponents of the program cite two sections of the Florida Constitution in particular: Article I, Section 3, and Article IX, Section 1.

Article I, Section 3, states, “[N]o revenue of the state or any political subdivision or agency thereof shall ever be taken from the public treasury directly or indirectly in aid of any church, sect, or religious denomination or in aid of any sectarian institution.”

Article IX, Section 1, states, “[A]dequate provision shall be made by law for a uniform, efficient, safe, secure, and high quality system of free public schools that allows students to obtain a high quality education and for the establishment, maintenance, and operation of institutions of higher learning and other public education programs that the needs of the people may require.”

For the current lawsuit to prevail, FEA will have to prove the state’s tax-credit scholarships drain public money. Patricia Levesque, chief executive officer of the Foundation for Excellence in Education, says she doubts they will be successful because the program does not use public money in the way prohibited by the state’s constitution.

The tax-credit program began following the Florida Supreme Court case Bush v. Holmes in 2006, in which the court ruled the state could not fund vouchers with public money. Today, nearly 70,000 Florida students are enrolled in private schools through the program, which gives a tax deduction to businesses and individuals for donating to scholarship organizations.

“After 14 years of seeing the [positive] results, it’s even more shocking. They will continue to attack low-income students and parents and their efforts to find schools that best fit their children’s needs. It’s extremely disappointing.”

PATRICIA LEVESQUE
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
FOUNDATION FOR EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

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Chris Neal (cdobro245@gmail.com) writes from New York, New York.
Tax-Credit Scholarship Program in Georgia Hits Limit on First Day

By Alexander Anton

Georgia’s tax-credit scholarship program reached its $58 million limit on January 1 for 2015, nearly three weeks earlier than it did in 2014. The popular program gives dollar-for-dollar tax credits to individuals who donate to the scholarship fund, up to $1,000 for singles and $2,500 for married couples who file taxes jointly. Businesses can also donate and receive credits of up to 75 percent of their state income tax liability.

In 2008, the Georgia General Assembly passed the Qualified Education Expense (QEE) Tax Credit Bill, and then-Gov. Sonny Perdue (R) signed it into law. The QEE program provides alternatives to the traditional public school system in Georgia, which has produced some of the lowest high-school graduation rates in the country in recent years, currently ranking 48th among the 50 states.

‘Thoroughly Vetted’

Shannon Goessling, executive director and chief legal counsel of the South-eastern Legal Foundation, says the program is constitutional, contrary to opponents’ claims.

“From a legal and state constitutional standpoint, the [QEE] program has been thoroughly vetted by top legal analysts and scholars and is very likely to survive the current legal challenge against its validity,” Goessling said. “A 2011 U.S. Supreme Court decision upheld a similar program in Arizona, so there is good case precedent.”

“The need-based program allows Georgians to direct a limited portion of their state income tax to one of several nonprofits and designated ... general scholarship funds for private K–12 schools in the state,” said Goessling.

Goessling says the program does not allow scholarship organizations to favor individual students.

“A family could not direct its tax credit to benefit a specific child,” Goessling said. “It’s innovative, to be sure, and its success has demonstrated that there is a broad public appetite for this type of scholarship funding for private schools.”

Substantial Public Support

Public support for the program is high. The Georgia Public Policy Foundation released a poll in 2014 showing more than 70 percent of Georgia residents support the program and 61.8 percent agreed the statewide yearly allowance should be increased to $100 million.

Another poll, released by McLaughlin and Associates for the American Federation for Children, a pro-charter school group, showed similar results: 65 percent of Georgians were in favor of the program and 64 percent favored raising the yearly allowance above the 2015 cap of $58 million.

Saves Taxpayers’ Money

A comparable program in Arizona saved the state millions of dollars per year. “The average scholarship is just a fraction of the amount the state spends to educate each child,” Goessling said. “Dr. Charles North of Baylor University found that the state saves ... between $44 million and $186 million. So it’s clearly not a dollar-for-dollar, either-or proposition, as anti-school choice advocates have argued for decades.”

Opponents challenged Arizona’s program, and the U.S. Supreme Court ended up hearing the case, Arizona Christian School Tuition Organization v. Winn, in 2011. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of allowing school choice.

In the majority opinion, Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote, “Like contributions that lead to charitable tax deductions, contributions yielding STO tax credits are not owed to the State and, in fact, pass directly from taxpayers to private organizations. Respondents’ contrary position assumes that income should be treated as if it were government property even if it has not come into the tax collector’s hands. That premise finds no basis in standing jurisprudence. Private bank accounts cannot be equated with the Arizona State Treasury.”

Georgia’s homeschooling community heavily supports the tax credit program. Mary Jo Patterson, a board member of the Georgia Home Education Association (GHEA), said, “School choice is one way to break the monop-oly the government school system has over education and will, in my opinion, improve education.”

A bill introduced in the current legislative session, House Bill 35, would raise the program limit from $58 million to $250 million, a more than four-fold increase.

Alexander Anton (alexanderanton.heartland@gmail.com) writes from Palatine, Illinois.

What is Common Core?

Common Core State Standards are the federal government’s effort to nationalize the curriculum taught in every elementary and secondary school in the United States, even private schools.

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Teacher-Prep Programs Increasingly under Fire

By Bruce Edward Walker

Teacher education programs are increasingly drawing scrutiny from government agencies and nonprofit groups seeking better outcomes from U.S. public schools.

The primary issue is whether current university programs successfully recruit and train potential educators. Several states have concluded many of their public universities and colleges fail to provide students studying to become teachers with an adequate education and have subsequently suspended those schools’ accreditation as teacher-education institutions. Many education stakeholders say the majority of states are responding too slowly to the problem.

According to a 2014 Education Week analysis, from 2009–14, states reported closing or preventing enrollment at less than 60 subject-area or grade-level teacher-preparation programs. The Education Week survey and analysis of teacher-preparation programs shows closure and suspension of entire teacher-education schools, departments, and providers is rare.

Kyle Olson, founder and president of the Michigan-based Education Action Group, says a lack of teachers is no reason to lower standards, a reason often used to explain why state officials are reluctant to discipline teaching programs. “There have been numerous reports of teacher shortages around the country,” Olson said. “The natural reaction from planners will be to make it easier to get into a teachers college and obtain a degree, only exacerbating the problem.”

Poor Preparation for Teaching Rigors

Olson says the failure of teaching-education programs is caused by a concentration on theoretical studies rather than practical knowledge.

“Colleges aren’t preparing teachers-to-be with the basic nuts and bolts of how to be a teacher, such as effective classroom management and teaching skills,” said Olson. “Instead, they focus on theories of education and ... on the opinions of far-left radicals like Paulo Freire and Bill Ayers. I fear this problem is going to get worse before it gets better.”

Kate Walsh, president of the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), says her organization has been observing the ongoing problems with teacher-prep programs and recognizes a wide disparity between what the public expects from teachers and the training those teachers receive. She says lackadaisical admission standards and low standards in courses are often to blame for poor results from teachers.

“What we did uncover in higher-education programs is many churn out thousands of students a year who just aren’t ready to teach,” said Walsh. “Many students graduate with honors, but if you dig down into their coursework, you’ll see that it’s easy to earn A grades in many programs.

“Assignments don’t prepare them for the rigors of teaching,” Walsh said. “They graduate unprepared to teach. About half of students enrolled in university education programs see how difficult real teaching is when they [teach students for the first time. Many students then] drop out.”

Grade Inflation and Criterion Deficient

NCTQ released a study in November 2014 that concluded teacher candidates are graded too easily. According to the report, 58 percent of schools are routinely granting higher grades to students in teaching programs than students in other disciplines.

Sampling 509 teacher-education programs, NCTQ found 30 percent of students graduated cum laude, while 44 percent of students in education programs earned honors. At some colleges, the honors gap between education-prep students and other disciplines exceeded 40 percentage points.

“Medical school is very hard, for example, because working as a doctor is a very demanding profession,” Walsh said. “Teaching is also a very demanding profession, yet universities make it easy for student admissions into education programs and provide an easy course of study. Admission policies need to be tougher, and assignments should simulate actual teaching and communicate how tough it is to teach.”

NCTQ’s study also found there was widespread use of “criterion-deficient” assignments, requiring nothing more from teacher candidates than a general statement or opinion. This approach renders evaluations of a candidate’s knowledge and skills difficult.

“Certain attributes of successful teachers cannot be taught: You don’t have to be a rocket scientist but you must be smart; you must enjoy being a teacher; and you must be willing to work very hard,” said Walsh. “We have to dispel [the notion] in this country that the only attribute necessary for being a successful teacher is [liking kids].”

Bruce Edward Walker (bwalker@heartland.org) is a policy advisor for The Heartland Institute.
By Tom Gantert

Bob Fayfich estimates fewer than 2 percent of the 176 nonprofit charter schools in Pennsylvania have hired for-profit companies to run them.

Fayfich, executive director of the Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools, says that puts the lie to common criticism of charter schools as allowing “profit” to enter the business of public education.

A Harrisburg newspaper ran a February 2 headline reading, “Big for-profit schools, big donations: the influence of charter schools on Pennsylvania politics.”

“Public education is a multibillion [dollar] business in this nation,” Fayfich said. “A lot of people are making a lot of money off the taxpayer dollars that go into education. Public education is a business whether they want to recognize that or not.”

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools reports there are 6,000 charter schools in the United States. About 67 percent are nonprofit, single-site schools. Nonprofit organizations running more than one school account for 20 percent, and for-profit companies run 13 percent.

Profiting from Taxpayer Money

Superintendent Michael Rice of Kalamazoo Public Schools in Michigan, Michigan Association of School Administrators (MASA) Executive Director William Mayes, and Michigan Education Association (MEA) President Steve Cook have all talked about charter school profiteers taking taxpayer dollars.

All three have benefited financially from taxpayer dollars in traditional public schools.

Rice received a compensation package of $269,553 in 2013 for running a public school district. Mayes’ MASA makes its money by collecting membership fees from school districts and putting on conferences attended by public school employees. His total compensation was $214,112 in 2013. Cook runs the largest teachers union in Michigan. Much of MEA’s revenue comes from dues collected from public school teachers. Cook made $235,626 in total compensation in 2013.

Decades ago, Cook’s MEA set up a nonprofit organization, the Michigan Education Special Services Association (MESSA), that offers health insurance to traditional public school districts. MESSA is now a $1 billion operation and pays Executive Director Cynthia Williams $285,729 in total compensation.

“There are millions of dollars in profit in Michigan for public schools,” said Gary Naeyaert, executive director of the Great Lakes Education Project, an organization set up to support choice in public education.

‘Anti-Choice, Anti-Parents’ Critics

Naeyaert objects to those who criticize the relatively few for-profit charter schools while giving a free pass to MESSA and its billion-dollar-a-year operation.

“No one is pointing their venom at MESSA,” Naeyaert said. “It’s just another example of anti-choice, anti-parents policy to defend the status quo.”

Criticisms of for-profit charters are heard at the national level, as well.

In June 2014, Thomas Gentzel, newly appointed executive director of the National School Boards Association (NSBA), wrote in a newsletter about concerns of “a deep-pocketed school privatization movement that aims to greatly accelerate the proliferation of for-profit charter schools and voucher programs.”

In 2013, Michael Resnick, executive director of NSBA, made $583,801 in total compensation. Two other executives of NSBA had total compensation of $440,000 and higher. NSBA made $16.1 million in 2013 in program service revenue, from conferences attended by public school employees.

National union leaders are also doing well financially.

Dennis Van Roekel, president of the National Education Association (NEA), received total compensation of $541,632 in 2014. John Stocks, executive director of NEA, made $412,398 in total compensation in 2014.

More Quality Schools Needed

Todd Ziebarth, senior vice president for state advocacy and support for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, said the debate should be about whether the schools are high-quality, not whether they are for-profit.

“We think it should be about the quality of options provided,” Ziebarth said. “We need more quality schools, not fewer. It is a bit curious that folks get hung up on charter school management companies that manage for profit. I don’t understand how that is fundamentally different than a food-management company that is providing services to public education for profit.”

Todd Ziebarth, Senior Vice President
National Alliance for Public Charter Schools

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The Heartland Institute

The author of Take Me To Your Government, James Payne (“Count Nef”) has taught political science at Yale, Wesleyan, Johns Hopkins, and Texas A&M. His recent books include A History of Force (2004) and Six Political Illusions (2010).

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Battling ‘Hurricane Gray’ Through Education Choice

By Ashley Bateman

Based on projections, by the year 2030 the United States will experience an alarmingly high age dependency ratio, transferring a majority of the economic responsibility for public health care and education to a shrinking working population.

A high ratio means a small number of workers must shoulder the burden of public health, education, and retirement costs for a high number of non-workers.

Economists refer to the looming demographic shift as “Hurricane Gray.” Over the next 15 years, they say, the U.S. education system will be producing students academically unable to keep up with their peers globally, and that will result in a less competitive U.S. economy. Education reform is necessary to avoid this dismal future.

Those concerns are the premise for Matthew Ladner’s new report, “Turn and Face the Strain: Age Demographic Change and the Near Future of American Education.”

“Economists have found dependency ratios to be predictive of economic growth,” Ladner writes, serving as a “measure of societal strain.”

“Between now and 2030 the baby boomers will be retiring and sending their grandchildren off to school,” Ladner said. “We’ve never really faced anything like this before. Our social welfare state is simply not configured for this at all. …We are more or less obliged to rethink the entire social welfare state, but the most urgent [need] is K–12.”

An Outdated Public Service
The traditional public education system has not served students well in the past 40 years, Ladner writes, and will continue to miss the mark unless there is a greater return on each education dollar spent.

Ladner recommends an array of education services be expanded to serve the diverse learning needs of today’s students: new private schools, institutions of higher education, private tutoring and therapists, and blended and online education programs, for example.

Creating a competitive marketplace would counter the surge of dollars spent and stagnant outcomes seen today, Ladner writes.

“High-quality blended learning models are producing powerful student achievement outcomes around the country,” said Don Soifer, Lexington Institute vice president and author of a new report, “Transforming Education Through Digital and Blended Learning.”

“Most of these models were designed in schools of choice—either charter schools or private Catholic schools,” he noted. “But today the most exciting narrative in the growth of blended learning is that forward-thinking leaders are implementing these models in traditional school districts, designed to address their specific educational needs.”

Role of the State
In his report, Ladner incorporates state-by-state dependency ratio breakouts and identifies states that will experience the heaviest strain.

New Mexico is projected to have the biggest increase in its age dependency ratio from 2010 to 2030, followed by North Dakota, Wyoming, and Florida. Utah will have the smallest.

“As I’ve researched this and talked to people around the country, [including] a lot of state lawmakers … most everyone is aware that this problem exists but they have it trained in their minds that it’s a federal problem,” Ladner said.

The demographic shift will affect state policy profoundly, Ladner said.

School Choice 2.0
Ladner calls his recommendations “School Choice 2.0”—charter schools and vouchers as steps in the right direction and education savings accounts (ESAs) trumping them all.

“[Recovery or school choice districts] are a far more powerful version of charter schools,” Ladner said. “We’re rolling back the proliferation of charter schools, demand is larger than supply, we can’t afford buildings … and yet we see a huge amount of academic progress.”

Legally robust, flexible, and allowing for higher education savings, ESAs represent the next generation of vouchers.

“Education savings accounts are a much more powerful version of the choice mechanism than the traditional voucher, a lot more flexible; it moves to a point now where we can change the educational method … and crucially, allow people to use unused funds for future education expenses,” Ladner said.

“Expanding choice options through ESAs is a much more cost-effective way to provide educational services,” said Patricia Levesque, CEO of the Foundation for Excellence in Education.

“We’re in the experimental stage here but I’m completely convinced that we have enough evidence from voucher programs, [namely] academic gains in the special-education schools and enormous progress tracked through NAEP,” Ladner said.

Arizona and Florida are the only two states to have passed ESA legislation. Mississippi is poised to vote on a bill that would give special-needs students access to $7,000 in ESA funds. More than a dozen states have filed ESA legislation this year.

Savings accounts give parents the opportunity to design high-achieving education plans for their children at a fraction of a state’s per-pupil cost, resulting in immediate cost savings.

‘Set Them Free’
Ladner concludes by reiterating the current system is unsustainable. “The status-quo does not represent a viable option. … [If] we set them free and put them in charge, parents just might amaze us with their transformation of education,” he writes.

He continues, “Our attempt to spend our way to high-quality schools broadly disappointed but persisted for a long time. We should grant independence to schools. … We should give almost complete control of education to parents and allow them to voluntarily contract with schools and other service providers.”

School choice, particularly in the form of ESAs, creates incentive for providers to develop better products, improving the education marketplace, Ladner said.

Soifer agreed. “Without a vibrant environment of school choice, it is extremely unlikely that we would be seeing blended learning taking off around the country as we do today.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@gmail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.
La. Gubernatorial Hopeful Denounces Common Core

By Ashley Bateman

In 2012, Louisiana lawmakers, backed by Gov. Bobby Jindal, signed on to the Common Core State Standards Initiative, as did most states nationwide. Three years later, following a downward trend in Common Core’s popularity, some big-name politicians in the state have switched sides. Jindal, for example, is now involved in three court cases aimed at blocking aspects of the standards and challenging their legality.

Following Jindal’s example, U.S. Sen. David Vitter (R-LA) has publicly denounced Common Core. Vitter is running for governor in 2015 and wants to stop implementation of the K–12 math and English standards.

In a statement to supporters December 2, the Local Control of Education Act would “prohibit the Federal Government from mandating, incentivizing, or coercing states to adopt the Common Core Standards or any other specific academic standards...”

In his statement to supporters, Vitter then describes an “inclusive, transparent, and democratic” adoption process and “methodical manner” of implementation, in contrast to the way in which Common Core was adopted.

“Those running for office are now beginning to pay attention to the promise of the opposition to hold elected officials accountable and make the removal of Common Core a priority issue in the upcoming elections,” Geymann said. “This has been a great exercise in democracy when the regular folks can take on the elite and push them into a corner.”

Louisiana Superintendent of Education John White remains in support of the federal standards, as do most members of the state’s board of education.

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.
In this clearly written 262-page book, Terrence Moore dissects every aspect of the Common Core State Standards. Anyone who has children should read this book, and not simply to understand what is wrong with Common Core. Parents should read it to learn how young people should be taught. It is a book on the philosophy of education.

Moore is a former Marine with a Ph.D. from the University of Edinburgh. He teaches at Hillsdale College and has founded numerous charter schools. He dissects the K–12 math and English standards not in a cursory manner, but by tearing Common Core apart with detailed explanations of why it is a terrible way to go about educating our children.

Moore is very thorough in explaining his teaching methodology. I recommend you first read the six-page conclusion, which is a calm assessment of where we are and where we should be going. In the next-to-last chapter, Moore offers a reading list for high school courses in literature, history, government, and economics.

Bribing States for Support
Much of the book constitutes unrelenting but excellent criticism of nearly every aspect of Common Core. The book details the federal government having spent $18 billion developing Common Core. Moore and his colleagues could no doubt have done better for a fraction of the cost. After the government’s paid consultants finished their work on Common Core, states adopted the standards through bribery: State officials signed on because it gave them a chance of winning Race to the Top money.

The standards were implemented without a single test of the curriculum at any school for any length of time. We are subjecting our children to the Common Core for seven hours a day for years on end with no testing of possible outcomes.

Moore tells the reader the outcome will be students politically indoctrinated in the fashion of the great dystopian novels Brave New World, by Aldous Huxley, and 1984, by George Orwell. Common Core proponents have at least one clear objective: to defeat the advance of charter schools and school choice in general.

According to Common Core supporters, the standards will prepare students for their role in the twenty-first century global economy. Moore writes, “Though college and career readiness are a byproduct of a solid education, they are not the primary motivation.”

Moore wonders what happened to the earlier intentions of the Massachusetts School Law of 1879, which stated the need to teach “principles of piety, justice and a sacred regard to truth, love to their country, humanity, universal benevolence, sobriety, industry and frugality, chastity, moderation and temperance and those other virtues which are the ornament of a human society.”

Teaching to a Test
Moore gives countless examples of classic literature taught not for its beauty and humanity but instead to dissect stories for their alleged politics, something K–12 teachers should not be teaching. Essentially, because Common Core requires teaching to a test, the standards force teachers to sacrifice the stories and characters in all their rich variety and individuality and impose the meanings decided by government bureaucrats.

I think Moore provides too much detail in his analysis of how Common Core treats great novels such as those by Jane Austen, Mark Twain, and dozens of others. The reader may not always agree with his points of view, which are both erudite and vitriolic. A reader could skim over some of Moore’s reviews quickly without missing the essence of the book.

Moore notes Benjamin Franklin, one of our greatest Americans, is all but absent from Common Core. Moore theorizes this is because Franklin’s success was completely without the help of government, which runs counter to what Common Core supporters think to be important.

Bias for Progressive Politics
Similarly, the speeches of Abraham Lincoln, Ronald Reagan, and Thomas Jefferson used in Common Core are chosen from those least offensive to “progressive government.” Moore astutely criticizes Common Core and its proponents for claiming the Declaration of Independence can mean different things to different people. What is important is what the Founders meant by it.

Moore says every lesson plan in the study of history has a bias intended to create a political position among the students. Nearly every book in the curriculum comes with a teacher’s edition, which Moore says makes life too easy for the teacher while ensuring students will receive the intended message from the curriculum. Moore says Common Core has the “transparent aim of promoting radical multiculturalism to the detriment of the universal principles of right and wrong, of liberty and happiness, on which our great nation was founded. It was already a trend in textbook publishing for 20 years, now it has an official imprimatur being followed by 45 states.”

This indoctrination, Moore writes, kills the dreams “of young men and women precisely at the moment of their lives when they ought to be building their dreams and figuring out how to pursue them.”

The Common Core standards seem to have been designed to strip children of any sense of self-reliance and make them dependent on government. Little wonder the more parents learn about Common Core, the more they dislike it.

By Jay Lehr, Ph.D.

“Anyone who has children should read this book, and not simply to understand what is wrong with Common Core. Parents should read it to learn how young people should be taught. It is a book on the philosophy of education.”

Jay Lehr, Ph.D. (jlehr@heartland.org) is science director at The Heartland Institute.

The Story-Killers: A Common-Sense Case Against Common Core

By Terrence O. Moore, Amazon Digital Services, Inc. 292 pages, $6.99, 2013
Ohio residents may never know whether a parent trigger law works, even though Columbus has a pilot program.

According to Greg Harris, director of the nonprofit organization Students-First Ohio, the pilot program was set up to fail.

Harris says the state and Columbus School District have made little effort to inform parents about the program. Twenty schools in Columbus are eligible for reform under the parent trigger law. Passed as part of the state’s budget in 2011, the law empowers parents to decide how to reform chronically low-performing schools.

The parent trigger in Ohio applies only to Columbus City Schools. It allows parents to petition for schools to become charters or for their administrations to be replaced. The reform process kicks in if more than 50 percent of parents in an eligible school district, or schools within a district, sign a petition demanding reform. Parents needed to submit a petition to the district by December 31 to force a change for the 2015–16 school year.

Harris says the school district’s goal was to get no response, which would then lead to the unfair assumption parents aren’t interested and the law is not effective and should be revoked. The announcement identifying eligible schools wasn’t made until late summer.

Since then, the districts and state haven’t made an honest effort to notify parents of the possibility of reform, Harris says. The only way parents could have learned about the parent trigger pilot program in Columbus was if they already knew the law existed and looked up the details online.

“You have to know about the law in the first place,” said Harris. “The school district should be notifying parents. If you want to make a sincere effort to notify parents, there are a lot of ways to do this: newsletters, sending something home with students, PTA meeting announcements.”

Set up to Fail

Harris says the lack of interest in eligible school districts is no accident.

“It’s almost like that is by design,” said Harris, noting the only effort to notify parents has been the addition of a parent trigger page online.

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Parental Involvement Necessary

Jeff Warner, communications director for the Columbus School District, said there are concerns the law could create problems for the district, including possible layoffs.

“Columbus has great schools to serve our students,” said Warner. “Since (the parent trigger is) part of state law, we have to abide by it. The biggest concern is making sure parents understand what we have available.”

Warner claims the real problem in low-performing districts is lack of parental involvement, and he says some of the state’s best teachers are in schools eligible for the parent trigger.

“If we don’t get the parents involved, the performance is going to be the same no matter what,” said Warner.

Harris said parent trigger laws inherently enhance parental involvement, requiring significant effort on the part of parents seeking to reform their schools.

“The parent trigger law gives parents leverage in a system that otherwise acts like it doesn’t have time for them,” said Harris.

Heather Kays (hkays@heartland.org) is a research fellow with The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
The Tenth International Conference on Climate Change (ICCC-10) will take place on June 11-12, 2015, in Washington, DC. You won’t want to miss this event!

Republican mid-term election gains create new opportunities to stop and begin to repeal the anti-energy and anti-jobs policies adopted during the height of the global warming scare.

New scientific discoveries suggest the climate’s “sensitivity” to carbon dioxide is lower than previously thought, and economists warn that reducing emissions enough to have a discernible impact on climate would cause more “energy poverty,” exposing millions of people to hardship or even death.

The most recent conference in this series, ICCC-9, took place in Las Vegas in July 2014 and was widely acclaimed as the best in the series yet. Some 650 people turned out to hear 64 speakers cover every aspect of climate change. Thirty-two organizations cosponsored the event and ten prominent scientists and activists received awards. Video of every presentation along with speakers’ Powerpoints delivered at that event can be found at climateconferences.heartland.org.

For more information and to register, go to climateconference.heartland.org.

To learn more about climate change awards, visit climatechangeawards.org.

The Heartland Institute is a 31-year-old national nonprofit organization based in Chicago. Its mission is to discover, develop, and promote free-market solutions to social and economic problems. For more information, visit our Web site at heartland.org or call 312/377-4000.