50% of legislators read School Reform News

School Reform News

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Parents, Children Celebrate National School Choice Week

A School Choice Week rally in Austin, Texas.

GOP Hopefuls Call for Common Core Repeal

By Kenneth Artz

While campaigning for the Republican New Hampshire presidential primary in January, businessman and reality-television star Donald Trump joined other Republican presidential candidates in calling for an end to Common Core State Standards.

Trump also called for a “tremendous” reduction in the size and authority of the U.S. Department of Education.

Prior to Trump’s rejection of Common Core, fellow candidates Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) and Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL) called for a repeal of the national curriculum standards.

Britany Corona, a state programs and government relations director at the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, explained the origins of the school choice movement and its impact on education reform and parent empowerment.

National School Choice Week (NSCW), a nationwide week of events first held in 2011 to help raise public awareness of all types of educational options for children, was commemorated with 16,400 events in all 50 states. NSCW events and rallies were held in 13,224 schools, and 20 special events were organized at state capitol buildings.

An estimated 1,012 local and state chambers of commerce and 808 homeschooling groups held affiliates.

By Jesse Hathaway

Parents, children, and educators rallied at events across the nation to celebrate the progress made over the past five years in the school choice movement and to promote pro-liberty school reform and parent empowerment.

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Minnesota School Officials Threaten Legal Action Against Homeschoolers

By Jenni White

A Minnesota family choosing to educate their child at home was threatened with legal action by local government school officials over alleged violations of the state’s laws requiring compulsory attendance.

In December 2015, Wayzeta Public School District (WPSD) officials notified the family of their alleged failure to file a “mandatory” notice of intent paperwork. WPSD included in the notification a warning that it planned to file charges with local law enforcement and government school truancy enforcers.

Minnesota law requires homeschooling parents to file a notice of intent for children under the age of 16. The child in question is 17.

Apology for Harassment

After complying with the legal threat, the family reached out to the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) for assistance. After HSLDA lawyers contacted the school district, officials apologized to the family for the incident.

Mike Donnelly, a staff attorney for HSLDA handling the family’s case, says Minnesota law is clear on this subject.

“Families do not have to file a letter of intent to continue homeschooling if the student is over 16 and the family has notified the district of its intent during previous years,” Donnelly said. “The district had no reason to make demands or threats of the family to produce further documentation.”

‘Egregious’ Actions

Donnelly says ignorance of the law is not a valid excuse for government school officials.

“We don’t get a lot of these ‘out there’ acts, but this one was particularly egregious,” Donnelly said. “This reflects what happens when officials don’t understand the law. Unfortunately, there are frequent occurrences across the country where school officials push back against homeschooling. We’ve heard public school officials say things to homeschool parents like, ‘We need your kids in school, because they raise the average of the state test scores for the school,’ or ‘We need you to bring your kids back to school because we lose money without your kids, and that’s not good for other kids.’”

District’s History of Harassment

David Watkins, executive director of the Minnesota Association of Christian Home Educators (MACHE), a nonpartisan organization representing the interests of Minnesota homeschool families, says Wayzeta Public School District has a history of harassing homeschoolers.

“This district is often confused about the law, and that confusion can border on harassment for parents trying to follow the law,” Watkins said. “Many school districts don’t know what the law says and tend to read more into it than is there.”

Watkins says government school officials often ignore the law.

“We actually had the superintendent of one Minnesota district send a letter out to homeschool parents saying that all homeschool students from ages zero to 21 had to be registered with the district, according to Minnesota law,” Watkins said. “That’s just not true. Families need to send letters of intent to their districts if homeschooling.”

Watkins says government school officials often ignore the law.

“Teachers and schools seem to think homeschoolers rob their district of money because these students don’t attend district schools. In fact, this couldn’t be further from the truth. Homeschool students actually save districts money, because school funding formulas often account for all students in the district. If some of these students are not attending the local brick-and-mortar public school, more resources are available for those students attending.”

David Watkins, Executive Director

Minnesota Association of Christian Home Educators

Educat ing Educators About Education

Watkins says some government school officials seem to think homeschooling families are freeloaders.

“Teachers and schools seem to think homeschoolers rob their district of money because these students don’t attend district schools,” Watkins said. “In fact, this couldn’t be further from the truth. Homeschool students actually save districts money, because school funding formulas often account for all students in the district. If some of these students are not attending the local brick-and-mortar public school, more resources are available for those students attending.”

Marjorie Holsten, a homeschooling parent and lawyer, says she has heard school officials repeat myths about homeschooling.

“I’m in a district near Wayzeta, and though it was a while ago, when I removed my two children from the public schools, I was told the school would lose funding for half of a teacher,” Holsten said. “[They told me] class sizes would be larger, and it would be all my fault.

“I responded that I was doing what I could to keep class sizes down by removing my own children,” Holsten said.

Jenni White (jlwplusdmw@gmail.com) writes from Luther, Oklahoma.
Nev. Judge Freezes State’s Education Savings Program

By Ashley Bateman

A state judge in Nevada is siding with opponents of a groundbreaking achievement in school choice, agreeing to freeze implementation of the state’s education savings account (ESA) program until a final ruling can be made on its legality.

The decision is forcing thousands of students to remain in government schools for an indeterminate amount of time.

James E. Wilson Jr., a judge for the Nevada Judicial District Court, agreed with the arguments presented by the Nevada chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union and Americans United for Separation of Church and State, halting the ESA rollout. The plaintiffs claimed the ESA program violates the state’s constitution because it bypasses rules requiring the Nevada Legislature to appropriate taxpayer money to “fund the operation of the public schools in the State for kindergarten through grade 12.”

Public Schools Still Get Funds

Michael Schaus, communications director for the Nevada Policy Research Institute, says Nevada’s ESA program allows some taxpayer money to follow the student from government schools to private schools, or vice versa, but public schools will continue to receive significant funds for every child living in a school district, regardless of whether the child attends a public school or private school.

“Because a portion of per-student funding would continue to go to the [student’s government-assigned] school for each child who takes an ESA, despite the fact that actual enrollment at that school would drop, per-student funding would actually increase,” Schaus said. “The way that the state does their portion of education funding is broken down to per-pupil funding, a guaranteed basic support of $5,700 to $5,900 per student.

“Once [a student chooses to] leave the school district, the school would no longer qualify for [that child’s] state funds, but they are still getting their local and federal funds for that child even though they would no longer have to educate them,” Schaus said.

Matt Ladner, a senior advisor for policy and research at the Foundation for Excellence in Education, says delaying the education savings account program has serious consequences for Nevada families.

‘Disappointing Decision’

“It’s a disappointing decision, but it’s not unexpected,” Ladner said. “The judge basically said that the plaintiffs would suffer irreparable damage if this program were allowed to proceed. Those actually harmed are the defendants. They’ve been making plans about how to educate their children.”

Ladner says Nevada’s government-operated schools are failing children.

“The public schools in Nevada really are overcrowded,” Ladner said. “It’s quite acute. In Clark County, schools are literally surrounded by trailer parks, and there is a pool of 5,000 long-term substitute teachers. The reality is the public school system in Nevada cannot keep up with student growth.”

Offering more choice to parents and students solves several problems at once, Ladner says.

“[In its first planned year,] the ESA program was going to allow students to get out of overcrowded and underperforming schools,” Ladner said. “The reality of the situation is that we can either broaden our definition of public education and allow people to pursue their own happiness, or [we can] have students in portable buildings staffed by people who don’t have bachelor’s degrees as teachers.”

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

IN OTHER WORDS . . .

“In short, Nevada’s government schools will continue to receive thousands of dollars for each child that takes advantage of Nevada’s school choice opportunity, without the expense of having to educate that same child.

“This means public schools will have more money for capital projects, bond repayments and even teacher pay. Contrary to the falsehoods being spread that ESAs will bankrupt public schools, the schools’ overall per-student funding will actually increase with the implementation of ESAs—to the benefit of the students who remain enrolled in those government schools.

“Across Nevada’s public education establishment, the results should be impressive. For decades the Clark County School District, with some 70 percent of Nevada’s public school pupils, teachers and administrators, has struggled with overcrowding and huge teacher shortages.

“Given that reality and the public education bureaucracy’s perpetual clamor for increased funds, the latter should see school choice as a major step toward tackling some of the current education model’s chronic and systemic failings.

“The fact that it is not shows, once again, that the militant opposition to education reform is rarely rooted in what is best for the children.”

Mississippi Governor Announces Second-Term School Choice Push

By Leo Pusateri

At the inauguration ceremony marking the official beginning of his second term, Mississippi Gov. Phil Bryant (R) announced his commitment to giving families better educational options and more opportunities for high-quality education using school choice programs.

“We should heed the lessons of history and not stand in the schoolhouse doorway and resist school choice in the name of district integrity or average daily attendance,” Bryant said during the speech. “If it is good for the child and preferred by the parents, let it be done.”

‘Education Crisis’

Brett Kittredge, communications director at Empower Mississippi, a nonprofit policy organization that promotes education choice, says the governor’s promise is encouraging because the state’s education system is currently in crisis.

“There certainly is an education crisis in our state,” Kittredge said. “Right now, more than 115,000 students are trapped in failing school districts, while another 95,000 are stuck in ‘average’ or C-rated school districts. And right now, parents have very few options to seek a better education for their child if they cannot afford to move to a better school district or cannot afford private school. This is unacceptable and [is the reason] parents want more options in their child’s education.”

Kittredge says school choice is about building up the next generation, not tearing down the government school system.

“This is not a rejection of public education as much as a desire from parents to see their child receive the best education possible, whether that is in a traditional public school, charter school, or private school,” said Kittredge.

Parent Power

Forest Thigpen, president of the Mississippi Center for Public Policy, says parents in the state are gaining the upper hand in the fight to attain greater educational opportunities.

“Teachers unions in Mississippi are virtually nonexistent,” Thigpen said. “District superintendents have filled the role of lobbyists and spokespeople for the status quo. They overplayed their hand over the past few years, and the current political leadership is now listening to parents and taxpayers who want better options that the superintendents have blocked.”

Thigpen says facilitating more competition among government schools and charter schools lets the best schools rise to the top.

“In every other sector of society, healthy competition is the fuel that propels advancement in achievement, and it can be the same in the education sector,” Thigpen said. “If school boards were to consider their job to be ensuring that a quality education is available for children in their district, instead of guarding their fiefdom and ‘the way it’s always been done,’ they would be much more successful.”

Leo Pusateri (psycmeistr@fastmail.fm) writes from Saint Cloud, Minnesota.

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“We have emphasized this freedom through the redesign of our state seal, and reaffirmed our national motto, ‘In God We Trust.’ With the special needs and charter schools legislation, we have provided more choice to parents. They now have the liberty to send their children to the school where they can receive the best education and care. You see, individual liberty must exist for all our people, but they cannot be confused by the expectation of an individual or collective privilege.

“There are rights in our society and there are privileges. For example, it should be a parent’s right, not just a privilege by income or social status, to take his or her hard earned tax dollars and send their child to a school they choose. Unfortunately, there are some who are content with keeping children trapped in failing schools. …

“To the [Mississippi State] Legislature and other public officials, I offer an invitation to join us on this historic journey into Mississippi’s future. Working together, we can accomplish all that we imagine. Today, we begin by boldly taking the first step along the journey, knowing that success is never easy or possible without willing sacrifice.”

—Mississippi Gov. Phil Bryant, Inauguration Speech, January 12, 2016
**Pa. Governor Plays Hooky with Charter Funding**

By Tony Corvo

Gov. Tom Wolf (D) has unilaterally redirected to traditional government schools $8 million of taxpayer money designated for the funding of charter schools. Wolf made the move as part of a months-long budget standoff with lawmakers seeking tax relief for the state’s residents. Wolf announced the release of billions of dollars in funding to government schools and county governments as part of a compromise with legislators.

The compromise between Wolf's plan for tax hikes and increased spending and lawmakers' budget plans, including tax reform and relief, did not include instructions for state education spending, effectively allowing Wolf to redirect the charter school funding.

Wolf Attack

James Paul, a senior policy analyst for the Commonwealth Foundation for Public Policy Alternatives, says Wolf seized on an opportunity to attack school choice.

"Undercutting charter schools has been a priority for Wolf since assuming office," Paul said. "Although Wolf signed most of the general appropriations bill, he was not presented with an Education Code—legislation typically enacted in conjunction with appropriations bill. Without the code, the governor had no specific instructions for doling out education dollars.

"Wolf took full advantage of this opportunity to distribute education funding in a highly political formula that disregards enrollment trends and student need. It also shortchanges charter schools by $8 million and funnels disproportionate funding to traditional public schools in Philadelphia, Chester-Upland, and Wilkinsburg."

James Paul, Senior Policy Analyst
Commonwealth Foundation for Public Policy Alternatives

**A Need for More School Choice**

Tim Eller, executive director of the Keystone Alliance for Public Charter Schools, a nonprofit organization based in Pennsylvania that represents charter schools and charter school students, says Wolf is committed to restricting parents' say in their children's education.

"The Wolf administration is focused on nothing more than eliminating parental choice and shutting down Pennsylvania's public brick-and-mortar charter school sector," Eller said. "There is a need for more school choice in Pennsylvania, and with the appropriate resources and support, the state's brick-and-mortar charter school sector is standing by to provide students with high-quality educational programs and services."

Eller says school choice is popular with parents trying to escape poor schools resulting from the government’s near-monopoly on education.

"Volunteers generally support school choice and the ability of students to seek an alternate public school when their traditional public school fails to meet their needs or provide them with a high-quality education," Eller said.

Tony Corvo (tcorvo54@gmail.com) writes from Beavercreek, Ohio.

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**Ky. Lawmakers Propose Rebooting State Education Standards**

By Andrea Dillon

Kentucky lawmakers are proposing to reform the state’s education standards.

A similar effort was made by legislators in 2009, resulting in the adoption of Common Core State Standards, a national initiative popularized by the Obama administration through its Race to the Top grants program.

State Sen. Mike Wilson (R-Warren), sponsor of the reform bill, says he wants to put Kentucky in control of the state’s education standards.

"There's been all this brouhaha about it, and our goal is to say, 'Look, what we're going to do is we're going to take control of our own standards and not be adopting other people's standards from over here,'” Wilson said. “Our goal is to take control of our standards by utilizing our own practitioners, our own teachers, our own higher-ed folks, and not have some kind of national standards that everybody claims that the federal government put together."

A Fresh Start?

Richard Innes, an education analyst with the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions, says it is important for the public to maintain a healthy skepticism of legislative efforts to change education standards.

“The new bill appears to be aiming at ... forcing our Department of Education and the Board of Education to use Kentucky folks to put together the new standards,” Innes said. “Now, does that guarantee that those folks won’t turn right around and rubber-stamp the existing Common Core? That’s a very big concern right now.”

Fixing Past Mistakes, Maybe

In 2009, as a result of a bill similar to Wilson’s, Kentucky became the first state to adopt the national Common Core standards.

“That 2009 bill specified that the work was going to be done by teachers, college professors, and stakeholders in Kentucky.” Innes said. “At the time, the Common Core State Standards were just in their infancy when the bill was passed in early 2009.”

Innes says lawmakers should learn from their past mistakes.

“What happened was kind of a perversion of the law, where we ended up adopting standards that were created outside of Kentucky by workgroups put together by governors and the school chiefs' organizations, which, in fact, did not include a single Kentuckian on any workgroup that worked on the standards,” Innes said.

Second Chances

Innes says he hopes lawmakers get it right this time.

“This new bill is, in a way, a recognition that we didn’t get what we were supposed to get back in 2009,” Innes said.

Andrea Dillon (thell1885@gmail.com) writes from Holly Springs, North Carolina.
Ga. Commission Releases Recommended Reforms

By Kenneth Artz

A Georgia government commission released a report in December 2015 detailing recommended reforms lawmakers should consider during the recently convened legislative session.

The commission called on the state’s legislature to fund charter schools in a more equitable manner and provide more support for districts wishing to explore tying teachers’ pay to student performance. The commission was composed of private-sector leaders, local and state education officials, and lawmakers.

The stated goal of the Georgia Education Reform Commission is to “[provide] recommendations intended to improve our educational system, increase access to early learning programs, recruit and retain high-quality instructors and expand school options for Georgia’s families.”

Georgia charter schools are currently excluded from government capital funding programs, and state charter school funds have been drying up in recent years.

Recommended Reforms

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IN OTHER WORDS . . .

“Regarding teacher compensation, the commission recommends that local districts be given technical advice on how to institute merit pay. And it advises that districts changing pay schemes give veteran teachers the option to stick with the current system, which gives automatic pay raises for added years on the job and added degrees.

“Teacher groups have said they will fight those recommendations even though local districts already have authority to institute merit pay if they wish.”


Chicago Schools Audit Shows Need for Expanded School Choice

By Jenni White

The results of an audit by the Office of the Inspector General for the Chicago Board of Education released on January 1 revealed evidence of hundreds of Chicago suburban parents falsifying address and residency documentation in order to help their children qualify for Chicago’s selective enrollment program.

The selective enrollment program, first established by Mayor Richard M. Daley in 1997 and managed by Chicago Public Schools’ (CPS) Office of Access and Enrollment, creates a process to identify at-risk children and transfer them to high-quality charter schools. It offers children in low-income households a greater opportunity to succeed educationally than what is available in their local government-operated school.

Doing Whatever It Takes

Don Soifer, executive vice president of the Lexington Institute, says the report’s revelations prove parents will do whatever it takes to obtain better educational opportunities for their children.

“These cases are a pretty clear example that families are not satisfied with the choices currently available to them, and [it shows] they feel their assigned public high schools are not sufficiently meeting their educational needs,” Soifer said. “It’s a shame the Chicago Public Schools’ inspector general needs to dedicate resources to surveillance, trailing of students, and investigations when what’s clearly needed are more quality seats available in schools students would want to attend.”

Power to the Parents

Chicago-area parents should be able to choose the school that best suits their children’s needs, says Matt Frendewey, national communications director for the American Federation for Children, a nonprofit organization whose mission is “[improving] our nation’s K–12 education by advancing systemic and sustainable public policy that empowers parents, particularly those in low-income families.”

“Most kids in CPS are lost in public school with few options, yet CPS would rather criminalize a parent than recognize the system is broken and look at the cause,” Frendewey said. “Unfortunately, only parents who have means have school choice. Those that don’t, have to cheat, rely on luck, or have no choice. Any child should be able to go wherever is best for them.”

Jenni White (jwplusdmw@gmail.com) writes from Dallas, Texas.

“These cases are a pretty clear example that families are not satisfied with the choices currently available to them.”

DON SOIFER, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT
LEXINGTON INSTITUTE

Real Race to the Top

Ben Scafidi, a professor of economics at Kennesaw State University and a senior fellow with the Georgia Public Policy Foundation, says treating charter schools and traditional government schools equally under the law helps everyone.

“Suppose all schools, public and private, had to compete for students,” Scafidi said. “Suppose that, when a given Georgia student enrolled in a school, all taxpayer funds devoted to her education followed her to that school. Under such a universal school choice plan, each school would have a powerful incentive to recruit and retain the very best teachers possible.

“Schools that did not have excellent teachers would lose students to schools that did, as it would now be possible for all parents to choose the best schools for their children,” Scafidi said. “Low- and middle-income families would be able to choose the best schools with the best teachers.”

Tying Outcomes to Rewards

Brittany Corona, a state programs and government relations director at the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, says merit-pay programs, such as those suggested by the Georgia Education Reform Commission, use basic economic incentives to reward teachers for providing excellent service.

“For most school districts across the country, teacher compensation is determined by the time spent in the position, certifications, and other measures that are input-based and fail to reflect performance outcomes,” Corona said. “With teacher merit-pay reforms, teachers who work hard and demonstrably improve student outcomes will be rewarded for their success in the classroom.”

‘Win-Win for Everyone’

Corona says pro-parent and pro-student reforms, such as school choice and merit pay, benefit students, teachers, and parents.

“When parents are empowered with their child’s education dollars, they can send their child to the best school and teacher for their child,” Corona said. “When teachers are rewarded for their performance, instead of by time spent in a position, they are incentivized to perform better. This is a win-win for everyone.”

Kenneth Artz (iamkenartz@hotmail.com) writes from Dallas, Texas.

“Doing Whatever It Takes”
U.S. Supreme Court Hears Landmark Union Fee Case

By Ashley Bateman

Lawyers representing a group of California teachers challenging the constitutionality of deducting union fees from government teachers’ paychecks have presented their opening arguments before the U.S. Supreme Court.

If the court rules in favor of the lead plaintiff, Rebecca Friedrichs, individual teachers would be allowed to decide whether or not to contribute to teachers unions. Currently, many public school teachers are required to contribute funds to a teachers union in order to teach.

The plaintiff in Friedrichs v. California Teachers Association is seeking to reverse a 40-year-old Supreme Court ruling, Abood v. Detroit Board of Education, which denied schoolteachers the right to fully opt out of union membership while employed in a public school system where teachers are unionized.

Feeding the Beast

Lawrence McQuillan, a senior fellow with the Independent Institute, a nonpartisan, nonprofit research organization based in California, says any money earned by teachers and redirected to teachers unions will be used in part for political purposes.

“All union activities are inherently political, and workers have a First Amendment right to not pay any dues or fees to a union to fund political activity they don’t support,” McQuillan said. “Clearly, government labor unions have changed the mix of public services offered in California communities through compensation negotiations. Union negotiating activities, therefore, embody political choices that have long-term political implications. It is impossible to separate unions’ negotiating activities from unions’ political activities.”

Devouring ‘Local Budgets’

McQuillan says teachers unions’ quest to benefit themselves at the expense of others has taken its toll on California.

“The primary factor is that government pension costs have devoured local government budgets in California and elsewhere in recent years,” McQuillan said. “When unions successfully lobby for higher government employee pension benefits or negotiate for lower government employee contributions to pension funds, these actions increase the share of government budgets devoted to pension costs. When more money goes to pensions, less money can go to other public services.”

Larry Sand, president of the California Teachers Empowerment Network, a nonprofit organization dedicated to educating professional teachers about union representation, says union leaders use their power to benefit themselves, not teachers or students.

“They are the biggest political player in the state,” Sand said. “They control the state legislature. They consider themselves the fourth branch of government.”

Collective Bargaining for More Money

Teachers unions effectively use other people’s money to obtain additional funds from friendly lawmakers, Sand says.

“The way things are now, teachers can opt out of the political parts of dues, which are about one-third, but this case is predicated on the idea that all union spending is political,” Sand said. “A union representative sits across the negotiating table from people they have put in office.”

McQuillan says a victory for Friedrichs and her co-plaintiffs would be a win for taxpayers and schoolteachers alike.

“A victory will make it more difficult for government employee unions to maintain their financial strength and political clout,” McQuillan said. “Many teachers will opt out immediately from paying any dues. Others will opt out later. Research shows about 20 percent to 35 percent will opt out long-term, but all dues and fees paid in the future would be paid voluntarily.”

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

Parents, Children Celebrate School Choice Week

Continued from page 1

ated events, and the governors of 27 states and more than 200 local lawmakers issued proclamations recognizing the week-long celebration of educational choice.

Susan Meyers, national media relations director for the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, says National School Choice Week celebrates freedom and empowerment for parents and families.

Celebrating More Choices

“National School Choice Week has been going on for about five years now,” Meyers said. “It’s an event that happens in the last week of January, and it’s a way for parents, students, policymakers, and advocates to celebrate school choice and the progress we’ve made in school choice since 1955, when Milton Friedman came up with the vision of giving all children the opportunity to pick an educational setting that works right for them.”

Meyers says the week-long event is about celebrating parents’ power to choose.

“School Choice Week is just to highlight and celebrate any choice that a parent of a child chooses to exercise,” Meyers said. “If they decide to educate their child at home by homeschooling them, or if they decide to send them to a public school, or to a charter school, or an online academy, … it’s whatever works for their child.”

‘A Huge Deal’

Lennie Jarratt, project manager for education transformation at The Heartland Institute, says National School Choice Week has become very popular with parents and educators.

“It’s a huge deal,” Jarratt said. “During this year’s National School Choice Week, a few of the scheduled events were actually held overseas. They’ve expanded. It’s not just in the United States anymore.”

Jarratt says the range of educational options available to parents is not as daunting as it may seem at first.

“Parents know their child, so they think about what their child needs, and then when they’re searching, they find the option that best suits their child,” Jarratt said. “It may be something different for each of their children, but parents understand best how their child learns.

“When finding options, that’s your starting point: What do your children need?” Jarratt said.

Jesse Hathaway (jhathaway@heartland.org) is managing editor of Budget & Tax News.
Calif. Education Board Approves New Charter School

By Ashley Bateman

California’s State Board of Education unanimously approved a request to transform an alternative education program at a local traditional public school into a public charter school, now called the Ross Valley Charter School.

The board determined on January 14 the Ross Valley School District’s Multi-Age Program met all the state’s criteria required to establish a new charter school, which will now be allowed to relocate its operations and operate independently from the school district’s supervision. Some district officials, such as Ross Valley Superintendent Rick Bagley, had opposed allowing the program to become its own school.

Long Waiting Lists

Vicki Alger, a research fellow with the Independent Institute, says district students who live in Marin County, which is located in the northern region of the San Francisco Bay Area, have fewer alternatives to government-run schools than other California children. “More than 9,900 students are currently on charter school waiting lists throughout the [San Francisco] Bay Area, and Marin County has fewer charter schools than most other [Bay Area] counties,” Alger said.

Alger says California charter schools have a proven track record of producing a higher level of student achievement. “California charter schools, in general, have a strong record of success,” Alger said. “They have higher median performance on the state accountability system than traditional public schools, and charter schools serving historically disadvantaged students are more likely to be among the state’s top-performing schools.”

Emphasis on Diversity, Outreach

Rana Barar, a spokeswoman for the new Ross Valley Charter School, says the school will work to include students of all backgrounds.

“Diversity was one core tenet of the charter,” Barar said. “Another core tenet was being able to expand the program, and a third was to be able to provide choice in a community that has nearly no choice.”

Rana Barar
ROSS VALLEY CHARTER SCHOOL

Community Benefits

Judy Wilson, a regional director for school development and support with the California Charter Schools Association, says Ross Valley Charter Schools will market itself to underserved populations in the area.

“They have done outreach to these communities in particular, who will benefit from a high-quality free public school option that emphasizes hands-on, individualized learning,” Wilson said.

Wilson says everyone benefits from having more educational options, including teachers.

“The community at large will also benefit [from] having a high-quality educational option, from parents who are clamoring for choices to teachers who are attracted to teaching in an empowering setting,” Wilson said.

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

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Texas Lt. Governor Calls School Choice ‘Top Priority’

By Darren Nelson

A state think tank’s annual convention, Texas Lt. Governor Dan Patrick (R) announced his commitment to promoting school choice in the state, calling education reform his “top priority.”

Patrick participated in a panel discussion hosted by the Texas Public Policy Foundation in January, joining Nevada Lieutenant Gov. Mark Hutchison (R) and former U.S. Sen. Phil Gramm (R-TX), to discuss the future of education reform in Texas and in other states.

‘Systemic Reform’

Brittany Corona, government relations director at the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, says Patrick’s commitment to education reform is sorely needed.

“Lieutenant Gov. Patrick [and] key members of the legislature support educational choice because they know it will create systemic reform of the Texas education system, which the state needs,” Corona said.

“This reform has the power to influence many other areas of public policy. However, the only other main education reform under consideration that will likely correlate with school choice is the Texas Supreme Court ruling on the state’s education funding system.

“School choice is an efficacious way for Texas to address its funding issue, by allowing parents to direct their children’s education dollars to the school—or curricula, in the case of education savings accounts—that best meets their education needs.”

Power to the Parents

Corona says giving parents a larger say in their children’s education is the key to producing better educational outcomes.

“In conceptualizing school choice programs, Milton Friedman once acknowledged it is fairer, more effective, and far more efficient to separate the government financing of education from the government running of schools,” Corona said. “Since 1970, America has increasingly centralized our education system on the federal and state levels. Since then, the federal government has spent over $2 trillion on education alone.

“School choice reforms push back this narrative of increased government intervention and centralization of the education system, by empowering those closest to the children, namely parents and teachers, with education decision-making authority,” she said.

All Aboard the Reform Train

Lloyd Bentsen, a senior research fellow with the National Center for Policy Analysis, says Texas lawmakers strongly support school choice.

“School choice, both public and private, has been a top priority of reformers in Texas for several legislative sessions now,” Bentsen said. “From 2003 to 2010, the number of students that left public schools for homeschools increased by 50 percent, and by 75 percent for those leaving for private schools.”

Bentsen says more parents are benefitting from leaving the government school monopoly.

“Parents are taking their children out of public schools for many reasons, including to provide better special education, where public schools are failing,” Bentsen said. “The portion of [Texas] public school students receiving a special education designation in recent years is at an all-time low of 8.8 percent, the lowest in the nation. Private school choice programs, with proven success in other states for students with disabilities, could benefit these students.”

By Tony Corvo

uring a regular meeting of the school board in Tyler County, West Virginia, board President Bonnie Henthorn announced she was withdrawing her children from the government-operated school system so she could homeschool them.

Board members are calling on Henthorn to resign, but she is resisting calls to do so.

Stephanie Butcher, a board member of the West Virginia Home Educators Association, says Henthorn’s decision to start homeschooling makes sense.

“[Henthorn] is a citizen, so she has a vested interest in providing the best possible education in a safe environment for the youngsters in her community,” Butcher said. “Besides, there are many school board members across the state and country without children in public schools.”

Increasing Popularity

Butcher says there are a variety of reasons many parents choose to educate their children, rather than leaving it to the government.

“I would say about 10 percent, at most, homeschool for religious reasons, but about half of homeschooling families include religious instruction as part of their regular school day,” Butcher said. “At least half of all homeschooling families have opted out of the public school system because of the quality of education at their local schools, and the remaining 40 percent do so for other reasons.”

Mike Donnelly, director of global outreach for the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), says the popularity of homeschooling is growing among American parents.

“There are over two million homeschooled children today, and that number could balloon to almost 10 million in the next 20 years,” Donnelly said. “Homeschooling works because it delivers high amounts of the key factors in [quality] educational attainment, such as high levels of academic engagement in a one-on-one instructional environment that is tailored to individual student needs driven by parental involvement in a safe and nurturing environment.”

More Acceptance in the Statehouse

Homeschooling is gaining greater acceptance among lawmakers, Donnelly said.

“HSLDA and the homeschool community have been successful in advocating for the idea that homeschooling is a good educational approach [that is] good for children, and this has been mostly accepted by policymakers,” Donnelly said. “Legislatures are revisiting their laws, drafted decades ago, that were suspicious of home education. In the last 10 years, over a dozen states have reformed their laws to make homeschooling compliance simpler.”

By Tony Corvo (tcorvo54@gmail.com) writes from Beavercreek, Ohio.
By Matt Hurley

Responding to the increasing popularity of opting out of Common Core-aligned standardized tests, Ohio lawmakers are proposing reforms to the way government schools are “graded” on educational performance.

The state’s Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) testing system, created as part of Ohio’s adoption of Common Core educational standards, was dropped in June 2015, after months of technological glitches and concerns about classroom time priorities. State law permits the government to withhold funding from schools with low rates of testing.

Safe Harbor from Sanctions

Lawmakers passed a law in June 2014 granting “safe harbor” to government schools with low testing rates, removing test scores as a criterion in school districts’ annual evaluations, but federal laws do not fully allow these protections. Government schools with low testing participation rates could face federal sanctions.

State Rep. Kristina Roegner (R-Hudson) says a newly proposed bill, House Bill 420, would help reduce the risk of federal sanctions incurred by testing opt-outs.

Roegner says her bill will give parents additional accurate information about the quality of their children’s education.

“The purpose of this is transparency,” Roegner said. “School district administrators would be able … to go to parents and quantitatively define how students opting out of assessments impact their school district. I should also note that under the revised bill, this would only be for one year.”

Roegner says HB 420 will also crackdown on government school officials who try to game the system.

“We have added a penalty for school district employees who suggest that a student should opt out of a state assessment,” Roegner said. “We want to put students opt out in order to boost the school’s grades.”

Penalties Removed?

Kelly Kohls, president of the Ohio School Boards Leadership Council, a grassroots organization of government school board members focusing on implementing educational reforms in their communities, says the bill is not as extensive as the version proposed in 2015. That bill, she says, offered protections from federal sanctions for underperforming schools.

“This bill protects districts from state financial sanctions if their report card grades fall for any reason, including students opting out of the tests,” Kohls said. “Holding districts harmless would be consistent with what was done in the previous safe-harbor bill passed [in 2015]. However, this year’s bill, HB 420, does not offer the same provisions for holding districts financially harmless [with the federal government] for opt-outs.”

Spinning the Results

“If less than 95 percent of subgroups are tested, the grade is lowered one level, meaning that the districts will look bad in the eyes of their community and [the public] will be less likely to pass levies,” Kohls said. “However, they often use this data to say they need more money to improve. Districts will always find a way to spin the propaganda their way. Therefore, I believe opting out of the tests will have no real impact to the district.”

Kohls says the bill may trigger federal sanctions contained in the Every Student Succeeds Act.

“HB 420 would permit every district to be in a safe harbor, … [there will be] no sanctions, no matter what their grades look like,” Kohls said. “This bill does not offer a financial safe harbor for districts that do not meet the federal requirements of 95 percent test-takers.”

“When working with my colleagues and other interested parties, we have developed a substitute bill that would make some changes to the original bill,” Roegner said. “Under the revised bill, the [U.S.] Department of Education would include two separate grades on the report card for the performance index. One grade would count the students who opted out as ‘zeros,’ as current law prescribes. The other would not count the students who opted out of these assessments; those students who opt out will not affect the grade at all.”

More Accurate Statistics

Ohio Lawmaker Proposes Protections for Those Who Opt Out of Testing

By Matt Hurley

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Matt Hurley (wendtvmat@yahoo.com) writes from Cincinnati, Ohio.
of Common Core, noting, “The Common Core State Standards Initiative was developed in 2009 by the privately run National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers,” Corona said. “Shortly afterward, the federal government offered $4.35 billion in competitive grants and No Child Left Behind waivers to states that agreed to adopt common standards.”

Top-Down Policies
Corona says the rapid rise of Common Core was followed by a slow-but-steady decline in support. “By 2010, 46 states adopted the national standards, but by 2015, over 15 of the original 46 [states] made efforts to remove themselves from the standards and aligned tests,” Corona said.

Corona says education reforms that will benefit children cannot be implemented while Common Core standardization is being mandated.

‘A Good Idea’
Neal McCluskey, director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, says presidential candidates’ focus on shrinking Washington, DC’s influence over individual classrooms is encouraging. “Slashing the budget of [the U.S. Department of] Education is a good idea, because schools are not hard-up for money,” McCluskey said. “In fact, for the past 40 years, they’ve been the recipients of huge spending increases per student.”

Emphasis on Breaking Monopoly on Education
McCluskey says breaking the monopoly on education currently enjoyed by the government is the key to real reform. “Doing away with Common Core would be a nice start, but moving to expand school choice is the real route … to school reform, because once we stop funding the provisioning of education [in government-operated schools alone], there will be real accountability, and schools will have to compete for students,” McCluskey said. “But this will be tough, because teachers unions and associations are very well-organized and powerful.”

Kenneth Artz (iamkenartz@hotmail.com) writes from Dallas, Texas.
Textbook Vendor Says Common Core Standards ‘All About the Money’

By Andrea Dillon

An undercover journalist for a nonprofit organization captured candid video of a national textbook company’s sales executive making inflammatory remarks about federal Common Core standards and textbook companies’ support of them.

Project Veritas, a nonprofit organization whose stated mission is to “investigate and expose corruption, dishonesty, self-dealing, waste, fraud, and other misconduct,” interviewed now-former Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Accounts Manager Dianne Barrow about why educational publishing companies generally support the federal education standards.

“What Are You, Crazy?”
“Do you think that the educational publishing companies are in it for the education, do you?” Barrow said in the recording. “It’s all about the money. What are you, crazy? It’s all about the money.

“I hate kids,” Barrow said later in the video. “I’m in it to sell books. Don’t even kid yourself for a heartbeat.”

Gilbert Sewall, director of the American Textbook Council, an independent national research organization established in 1989 to review and monitor the history textbooks used in government schools, says Barrow’s candid remarks are not surprising.

“Who Benefits?

Stephen Gordon, a spokesman for Project Veritas, says most of the support for Common Core is based on financial concerns, not pedagogical ones.

“Almost every teacher I know hates Common Core,” Gordon said. “There are a lot of liberals speaking out against Common Core. There is even a lot of opposition within various teachers’ unions. It seems the only people who benefit from Common Core are the publishing companies and the politicians to whom they send their donations.”

Gordon says he hopes his organization’s undercover journalism gets people talking about education reform.

“We’d like to see politicians at all levels making Common Core more of a priority,” Gordon said. “If Common Core became a hot debate topic among the presidential candidates, the mainstream media would be forced to provide the issue the coverage it deserves.”

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

INTERNET INFO


Federal Reforms to Replace NCLB Hit Sweet Note for Music Educators

By Ashley Bateman

When Congress passed its rewrite of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), it reshuffled some priorities but did not change the national government’s influence on education and curricula at the local and state levels.

The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) was signed into law by President Barack Obama in December 2015, replacing NCLB. Although ESSA and NCLB are similar, ESSA features the inclusion of art and music education as “core subjects.”

Changing Core Curricula

Shannon Kelly, director of advocacy and policy for the National Association for Music Education (NAfME), the world’s largest arts education advocacy organization, says including art and music education in government schools’ curricula is critical.

“Students have not been getting access to the broad and rich education they need to succeed in the twenty-first century workforce,” Kelly said. “The curricula restricted opportunities, rather than broadening them. There has been a groundswell of national pushback [from] teachers and families [who have] questioned the wisdom of NCLB.”

ESSA expands support for music education in government schools, Kelly says.

“The expectation of the authorizers is for students to have a well-rounded education,” Kelly said. “We’ve moved from a sub-paragraph [in NCLB] to a bill that says a well-rounded education is essential to every student’s learning. With every major grant and funding opportunity, the expectation is that schools and local education agencies are expected to demonstrate how this money is being used.”

Long-Term Implications

Scott Sheehan, music department chair at Hollidaysburg Area Senior High School in Pennsylvania and president of the NAfME Eastern Division, says music education has a lasting impact on children’s lives.

“Music education is really poised to do great things for students for a long time,” Sheehan said. “We’ve got the tools in place, and now the backing of the federal government to provide outstanding experiences and opportunities.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.
Parents Cheer for Choice at Mississippi State Capitol

By Steve Wilson

School choice advocates in Mississippi held a rally at the Mississippi State Capitol to celebrate educational reform victories of the past, such as the passage of legislation that made available charter schools and education scholarship accounts, and to discuss the future of the pro-liberty education reform movement in the state.

Taking On the ‘Establishment’

Gov. Phil Bryant (R) and Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves (R) spoke at the rally in the capitol’s rotunda. Bryant criticized the state’s “educational establishment” for opposing previous school choice reforms, and he said he wants the expansion of school choice to be his primary legacy.

Bryant signed into law a bill permitting charter schools in 2013, and in 2015 he signed an educational scholarship account bill for parents of children with special needs.

“The education establishment was determined to keep these children trapped in failing schools or in mediocre schools that didn’t provide the care they needed. They built Berlin Walls around them, not to keep people out, but to keep these children in. We pushed through that, and we will again.”

PHIL BRYANT, GOVERNOR, MISSISSIPPI

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“’They built Berlin Walls around them, not to keep people out, but to keep these children in. We pushed through that, and we will again.’”

ESA Expansion Considered

Expansion of the state’s educational savings account (ESA) program for parents with children with special needs is one route school choice advocates are considering to help provide greater educational opportunities. The program is currently capped at 500 students with an individualized education plan for the 2015–16 school year, with an additional 500 being eligible for the program in 2016–17.

Under the program, participating parents receive $6,500 to use on tuition, books, and other approved learning aids. Out of 251 who applied, only 107 children received ESAs in the first year of the program.

Educating Lanna

Martha Beard, whose adopted daughter Lanna was among the students to receive an ESA in the inaugural year, told the crowd about the positive effects the program has had on her family. With the ESA, the Beard family can afford to send Lanna to a specialized school in Jackson, New Summit School, to help meet her needs.

“They loved what they had to offer, but prior to the ESA program there was no way for us to afford the tuition and the fees associated with the school,” Beard said. “Then we heard about the ESA for children with special needs that the [Mississippi State Legislature] passed and Gov. Bryant signed into law. It was an answered prayer.”

Although charter schools are allowed in Mississippi, they can be placed only in failing districts, and students are unable to cross district lines to attend them. Both Bryant and Reeves have said they would support expanding charter schools to other school districts.

“As I see the progress that’s been made, I’m overjoyed,” Reeves said at the rally. “I look forward to continuing to work with Gov. Bryant, [House] Speaker Philip Gunn, and leaders in both the House and the Senate to continue our efforts to make sure every kid in our state gets an opportunity for a quality education, which will lead to long-term success.”

Steve Wilson (swilson@watchdog.org) writes from Pearl, Mississippi. An earlier version of this article was published by Watchdog.org at http://watchdog.org/255029/school-choice-rally/. Reprinted with permission.
North Carolina Panelists Break Ranks with Standards Commission

By Andrea Dillon

A
fter a year of study, the North Carolina Academic Standards Review Commission (ASRC), a government commission tasked with reviewing state education standards, recommended continuing the state’s use of Common Core.

As part of the recommendation, members of the math panel for ASRC criticized John Scheick, a former university math professor and leader of the math panel, for his criticism of the state’s use of the Common Core math curriculum.

Reviewing the Reviewers
The commission’s co-chairwoman, Tammy Covil, agreed with Scheick and publicly dissented from the commission’s final decision to retain the Common Core standards.

Covil says ASRC ignored its duties by voting to stick with Common Core.

“I felt that some of those commissioners were not following their roles and responsibilities as appointed members of the commission, in failing to make appropriate recommendations,” Covil said. “I had to distance myself from the majority, who decided to politicize the commission’s work and abdicate their responsibilities back to the Department of Public Instruction and the [North Carolina State] Board of Education.”

Covil says North Carolina teachers support Scheick’s recommendations to end the state’s Common Core program.

“The teachers I spoke to in the field, the ones who came to me and spoke to me about the results and findings that the math workgroup produced, were wholeheartedly supportive of it,” Covil said.

Covil says North Carolina lawmakers are ignoring the effects of Common Core on education.

“They’ve done some great things, but I feel that our state leadership still doesn’t understand what Common Core is, what it is designed for, and what it is designed to do,” Covil said.

Unequal Scrutiny
Terry Stoops, director of education studies at the John Locke Foundation, says the Academic Standards Review Commission was not looking for problems in the right places.

“Those leading the questioning did not feel the need to scrutinize the work of the English Language Arts group as they did of the math group,” Stoops said. “The fact that they zeroed in on the math standards and conducted what many considered to be an inquisition of Dr. Scheick suggests that there was a premeditated effort to ensure that there was not a recommendation that would allow North Carolina to move to a different state’s standards or some other external standards.”

Stoops says the commission wasted a great opportunity to make positive changes to the state’s education standards.

“I thought it was a disappointing outcome to a process and discussion that showed a lot of promise,” Stoops said. “The commission had been tasked to take North Carolina in a different direction, and the commission seemed to be moving away from Common Core, or at least having very serious discussions about making a substantive change to North Carolina’s standards. In the end, that did not happen.”

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

INTERNET INFO

IN OTHER WORDS . . .

“Earlier this month, the [North Carolina] Academic Standards Review Commission rejected the recommendations put forward by its math working group. The group wanted to replace the Common Core math standards in kindergarten through eighth grades with Minnesota’s math standards, and to scrap integrated math in high school and have the state go back to teaching two algebra courses and a geometry course.

“The math recommendations were defeated, with [Co-chairwoman Tammy] Covil voting on the losing side.

“Instead, the commission adopted a set of guidelines for a Common Core rewrite. Those guidelines could result in significant changes, but they give the State Board of Education much more discretion as it makes them. Only the State Board has the power to change the academic standards.

“In her letter, Covil said Common Core supporters expect financial gain from a ‘nationalized curriculum.’”

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A Chorus of Viewpoints on Common Core’s Cultural Catastrophe

Common Ground on Common Core: Voices from Across the Political Spectrum Expose the Realities of the Common Core State Standards

By Jay Lehr
Common Core, the national education curriculum standards created by academic experts, lawmakers, and educational materials companies, is a complex subject few individuals fully understand, but Common Core is not a totally opaque subject.

Common Ground on Common Core is a great resource for those interested in learning more about how educators today are teaching the next generation.

Chorus of Viewpoints
The book is a collection of essays about Common Core and the state of government pedagogy today, written by parents, academics, psychologists, psychotherapists, politicians, and teachers. One fact that becomes apparent when reading the collection of essays—one that may be little-known—is just how tightly Common Core is bound to big businesses and moneyed interests, such as Microsoft founder Bill Gates and the Gates Foundation, a nonprofit organization founded by Gates.

The essayists say these corporations and business interests are not changing the face of education for the benefit of our children, but instead to create a more easily imprinted workforce that lacks individuality and creativity.

Effects on Scientific Creativity
Some essays in Common Ground on Common Core stand out as exceptional contributions to the current debate on the standards.

For example, Christopher Tienken, an assistant professor of education at Seton Hall University, provides a brilliant exposé of the misguidedness of these policies. Tienken says implementing Common Core curricula to standardize, centralize, and homogenize public education leads our nation’s government schools down the same road traveled by the Chinese and German governments.

Tienken says historically, the creativity and innovation of American scientists’ work has led to American science carrying more weight in the scientific world than the work of Asian or European scientists, but Tienken says Common Core would remove that unique advantage.

Sandra Stotsky, professor of education at the University of Arkansas, says there is a lack of rigor in the assumptions and hypotheses inherent in the Common Core curricula, and she questions the academic qualifications of the many third-party participants involved in the creation of the standards.

James Milgram, professor of mathematics at Stanford University, and Ze’ev Wurman, a visiting scholar at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, argue in their essay Common Core does not meet its stated goals of increasing the competitiveness of American students in our increasingly globalized economy. They say the goal of Common Core from the start was truly to dumb-down educational standards while giving the appearance of educational improvement.

In the Field
Longtime schoolteacher Ceresta Smith shows in her essay how Common Core’s lack of vetting and verification harm special-needs students and children from low-income families. Smith says instead of being a rigorous set of standards encouraging students to become competitive globally, Common Core violates many state and federal laws and will stunt many students’ academic development.

The chorus of voices from many walks of life and viewpoints contained in Common Ground on Common Core will serve to educate and inform parents, educators, or laypeople who wish to learn more about the real story behind Common Core and how its misguided policies are hurting our children and our culture.

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

IN OTHER WORDS . . .

“Not only did the [national Common Core standards] Work Group fail to include any high school mathematics teachers, it failed to include any English professors or high-school English teachers. How could legitimate standards in either subject be created without the very two groups of educators who know the most about what students should and could be learning in secondary mathematics and English/reading classes? Because the twenty-four members of the Work Group labored in secret—without open meetings, sunshine-law minutes of meetings, or accessible public comment—their reasons for making the decisions they did are lost to history.

“The absence of relevant professional credentials in each standards-writing team helps to explain the flaws in the grade-level standards. The ‘lead’ writers for the grade-level [English Language Arts] standards, Coleman and Pimen-tel, had never taught reading or English in K–12 or at the college level. Neither has a doctorate in English or reading, nor had either of them ever published serious work on K–12 curriculum and instruction. Neither had engaged in literary scholarship or research in education; they were virtually unknown to English language arts and reading educators and to higher education faculty in rhetoric, speech, composition, or literary study. A third ELA standards writer originally listed as part of the three-person grade-level standards-writing team—James Patterson, a staff member at ACT—dropped out of the limelight early on. What role he played is unknown.”

—Sandra Stotsky, “An Invalid Validation of Common Core’s Standards,” Common Ground on Common Core: Voices from Across the Political Spectrum Expose the Realities of the Common Core State Standards
Popularity of Homeschooling Grows, Parents Flock to Homeschooling Conventions

By Lennie Jarratt

The popularity of homeschooling continues to grow nationwide as more parents choose to withdraw their children from government schools and take a more active role in their children’s education.

Current estimates of the popularity of homeschooling suggest there are between two million and four million homeschooled students in the United States. There are just over 50 million students in government school systems today, meaning homeschooled students now constitute 4 to 8 percent of all school-aged children in the United States.

Unconventional Conventions

There are more than 100 homeschooling conventions held in the United States each year. The homeschooling convention with the largest attendance is operated by Great Homeschool Conventions (GHC).

GHC holds four conferences each year. In 2016, these conventions will be held in Greenville, South Carolina, from March 10 to March 14; Fort Worth, Texas, from March 17 to March 19; Cincinnati, Ohio, from March 31 to April 2; and in Ontario, Canada, from June 16 to June 18.

Lisa M., a homeschool parent, attended one of these conventions for the first time in 2015. Lisa says the convention was helpful, and she says other homeschoolers should try it out.

“I came here not knowing what to expect,” Lisa said. “I left knowing I can do this. I found all the resources I needed to meet the specific education needs of my children. Every person thinking of homeschooling should attend a conference. You will be encouraged.”

IN OTHER WORDS . . .

“We had a great first-year homeschool convention in 2015. Texans from all over the state including Fort Worth, Dallas, Austin, Houston, Arlington, and San Antonio attended our first Texas event. We even had homeschooling families from the surrounding states of Oklahoma, Kansas, Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, and Arizona that showed up to check out the event! We had such a great time that we’re going to do it again in 2016: March 17th through March 19th, 2016, at the Fort Worth Convention Center.

“Chrystal Evans Hurst, [the] daughter of Tony Evans, John Stonestreet, Michael Gurian, and over 40 other featured speakers will be leading core sessions covering a huge variety of session topics: topics that will inspire you to continue, teach you how to overcome difficult times in homeschooling, and encourage your efforts to do the best for your children.

“We are still getting proposals from a wide variety of educators, Ph.D.s, veteran homeschooling moms, and more! A full schedule will be posted approximately one month prior to each event. The topics are as broad as the Texas sky! Homeschooling 101, special needs, the how-tos of teaching math, science, English, literature, reading … all core subjects are covered. Inspirational sessions, how to homeschool through hard times, Common Core awareness, and different styles of homeschooling (Charlotte Mason, Classical, hands-on, etc.) are also covered.”

—“Fort Worth, TX Homeschool Convention,” Great Homeschool Conventions: http://wwww.GreatHomeschoolConventions.com/

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Something for Everyone

Homeschooling conferences typically include education sessions tailored to children and parents with varying needs. There are breakout sessions for younger children and teens, homeschool novices, homeschool experts, and special-needs and gifted children.

Lectures and speeches on the various aspects of homeschooling are a significant part of many homeschooling conferences. Speakers such as bestselling author Ann Voskamp, education expert Kathy Koch, Ph.D., marriage and family expert Michael Gurian, autism specialist Angela Gonzales, Ph.D., and scientist Jonathan Sarfati, Ph.D., have all made presentations at these events in the past.

Many conventions provide space for about 200 vendors. Homeschoolers are able to purchase curricula, homeschooling aids, novels, children’s books, science sets, and many other items. If a parent needs something for homeschooling, he or she will almost certainly find it at one of these conferences.

Not Just Educational

As homeschooling has become more popular in the United States, these conventions have become yearly must-attend destinations for many families. The conventions often feature entertainment sessions for those wishing to take a break from learning about home education. GHC set-lists feature musical and theatrical acts and celebrities, including the Willis family from the eponymous TLC reality TV show; a production of The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, based on the book by C.S. Lewis; and popular comedians Bob Smiley and Dennis Regan.

The increase in the number of homeschoolers has led to a growth in the group’s political clout. A few years ago, an Illinois state representative introduced a bill to force all homeschoolers to register with government school officials. Within one week, 4,000 homeschoolers had descended on the Illinois State Capitol to protest the bill, which was later defeated. Homeschooling conventions play a significant role in keeping homeschoolers informed and organized.

The burgeoning number of homeschooling conventions indicates the rise of homeschooling; it’s now a popular cultural movement. Homeschooling families are increasingly attending these gatherings of educational expertise for training, support, and resources, and this development is building the movement’s political and social significance.

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