Louisiana Lawmakers Approve Nation’s Broadest School Choice Bills

By Joy Pullmann

Louisiana lawmakers sent to Gov. Bobby Jindal two education bills that would establish the largest voucher program in the country, curtail teacher tenure, tie educator pay and job security to student performance, and expand charter schools.

House Bills 974 and 976 passed by solid margins a month after they were introduced, amid rancorous debate and demonstrations. They comprise the bulk of Jindal’s education agenda, which he announced in January.

“This is not about the next election. This is not about the next poll. This is about the next generation,” Jindal said several hours after the bills passed. “This is important for Louisiana. It’s

BARGAINING CURBS SAVE WIS. MILLIONS

By Joy Pullmann

The very legislation that nearly provoked riots inside Wisconsin’s capitol has saved many school districts from financial ruin or having to fire significant numbers of teachers, concludes a new report from the Education Action Group.

The Wisconsin legislature and Gov. Scott Walker (R) passed Act 10 in early 2011. It sparked a weeks-long, raucous protest in Madison’s streets and the capitol building, plus a recall effort against Walker, his lieutenant governor, and four state senators. The law limits most public-sector collective bargaining to salaries, not benefits, and caps public employees’ annual raises at the rate of
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Michigan Law Prohibits Schools from Deducting Union Dues

By Sally Nelson

Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder has signed a bill to prevent public schools from automatically deducting union dues from employee paychecks.

The new law, formerly House Bill 4929, removes the state from its position as middleman between unions and their members, he said.

“This legislation furthers the goal of good government by promoting greater transparency and ensuring that public resources are used solely for their intended purposes,” Snyder (R) said in a statement. “It is essential that state public school resources be devoted to the education of our children.”

Public Act 53 also requires all government employee unions to submit an annual independently audited financial statement to the Michigan Employment Relations Commission, outlining the cost of collective bargaining, contract admission, and grievance adjustment.

This keeps employees who do not wish to join a union from paying more than their share in agency fees. In Michigan, even nonunion employees often must pay agency fees for union-negotiated wages and benefits.

Automatic Enrollment

Previously, teachers and other public school employees signed up to have union dues deducted from their paychecks when they started work. Bill cosponsor and state Rep. Pete Lund (R-Shelby Township) said very few school employees are not in unions in Michigan, though there are ways around joining.

Union dues stay in the paperwork “forever” in Michigan, said Michael Van Beek, education policy director at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.

“[Employees] come to view dues being deducted as something that happens automatically, like taxes. It’s just part of their agreement to work there,” Van Beek said.

The new law requires union members to pay dues out of pocket. Lund said this means the government will no longer be a collection agency for unions.

“For years, unions have gotten everything they wanted. Now we’re standing up for the people. This is not something we created in Lansing. This is from the teachers. A decent number are saying they do not want [dues pulled from their paychecks],” Lund said.

Aiming for Transparency

One goal of the law is to bring more accountability to all government employee unions, not just those for teachers, Van Beek said. The state has lacked this accountability, he said.

Unions were previously required to submit a financial report to the government, he said, but the report was obscure and included little important information.

“There is a lot of skepticism about how unions spend their funding,” Van Beek said. The new law “enables members to have a better sense as to how their union is spending money.”

Michigan unions on average spend less than half their funds on member representation and collective bargaining, found Paul Kersey, director of labor policy at the Mackinac Center, in a report.

Punishing Unions?

Union advocates have labeled the law an attack against teachers and collective bargaining.

“This legislation serves no purpose except to punish school employees and the unions that represent them,” said Steven Cook, president of the Michigan Education Association. “It is a mean-spirited political attack by Republican legislative leadership seeking retribution against those who politically oppose them.”

Van Beek said union privileges, not workers’ rights, are what’s at stake here.


Freedom Fosters Excellence

The teaching profession is more attractive when teachers have more freedom of choice regarding union membership rather than being constrained to organizations they may not prefer or agree with politically, Lund said.

“That’s good for the students,” Lund said. “There are good people I know who have left education because they don’t agree with the way things are going with unions.”

Public employee unions, Olson said, are “supplicants at the public trough” and always want more from local and state governments. Giving in is especially harmful to students as districts and states face large budget shortfalls, he said.

“In district after district after district, things benefiting students get cut and teachers get raises. Indirectly, if unions are made less powerful, students will benefit,” he said.

Sally Nelson (sallynelson7@gmail.com) writes from Hillsdale, Michigan.
New Jersey Legislature Tackles Teacher Tenure

By Vicki Alger

Legislation under consideration in New Jersey would require annual evaluations and evidence of student achievement growth for a teacher to earn tenure and would make it easier to fire ineffective teachers.

Senate Bill 1455 resembles reforms proposed by Gov. Chris Christie (R), including requiring student achievement growth for a teacher to earn tenure and would make it easier to fire ineffective teachers.

“Research shows that great teaching not only increases student learning, it benefits a child for the rest of his or her life. Great teaching and teachers matter, and every classroom should have one.”

DERRELL BRADFORD, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
BETTER EDUCATION FOR NEW JERSEY KIDS

Objective Measures of Quality

New Jersey has earned an overall grade of D+ from the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ).

Making student achievement an explicit component of teacher evaluations and tenure decisions is a leading NCTQ recommendation. Most states, including New Jersey, base tenure on time served—typically three years—without considering student performance.

Eight states require five years before a teacher can be tenured. Florida, Idaho, and Rhode Island have effectively ended teacher tenure altogether, awarding only annual contracts to new teachers.

The Teacher Effectiveness and Accountability for the Children of New Jersey (TeachNJ) Act would require principals to rate teachers ineffective, partially effective, effective, or highly effective based on multiple objective measures including student learning growth. Because just 20 percent of subjects are currently tested, under TeachNJ districts would develop their own assessments for other subjects.

Under the bill, a newly hired teacher would be eligible for tenure after four or more years on the job. New teachers would complete a first-year mentorship. Annual evaluations would begin at the end of their second year. They would have to receive three consecutive effective or highly effective evaluations to be eligible for tenure. After two years of partially effective or ineffective ratings, teachers could be fired, and they could not appeal their ratings.

Ending ‘Last In, First Out’

Unions argue these changes will make it easier for school districts to fire more expensive veteran teachers.

But TeachNJ supporters say ending “last-in, first-out” policies when layoffs are necessary will base staffing decisions on teacher talent, not time served.

“Research shows that great teaching not only increases student learning, it benefits a child for the rest of his or her life,” said Derrell Bradford, executive director of Better Education for New Jersey Kids. “Great teaching and teachers matter, and every classroom should have one.”

Grandfathering Draws Fire

Exempting teachers tenured before the bill’s effective date in 2014 is drawing the most criticism from opponents and supporters alike.

“The grandfather clause was intended as a compromise,” said Ginger Gold Schnitzer, chief lobbyist for the New Jersey Education Association. “But it’s almost unworkable, where some employees work under one set of rules, and others under another.”

Clashes between teachers unions and the Christie administration over tenure weakened New Jersey’s grant application for federal Race to the Top funding, and tenure remains a point of contention.

“It is no comfort to a parent of a child with a bad first-grade teacher in front of them to know that five, ten, or twenty years down the road a new teacher will be held to a different standard,” said Jerry Cantrell, president of the Common Sense Institute of New Jersey. “Improving upon the bill by not grandfathering in teachers is the most important part.”

Ruiz said she has “heard from a lot of people urging that [the bill] apply retroactively” and is considering amending the bill to address that and other concerns aired in the hearings.

“This has been a long and arduous journey here in New Jersey,” said Cantrell. “So there is cause for hope and concern over this.”

Vicki Alger, Ph.D. (vicki@vickialger.com) is a senior fellow at the Independent Women’s Forum.
Wisconsin Assembly OKs Special-Needs Vouchers

By Ashley Bateman

Wisconsin's State Assembly passed Assembly Bill 110, which would allow disabled students to take up to $13,376 in state funding to a public out-of-district, private, or charter school.

But because Assembly Democrats used a blocking procedure, the proposal must receive another vote before going to the state Senate.

Although Wisconsin's open enrollment policy allows some children to move outside their designated school district, 44 percent of children with special needs were denied their requests to do so in the 2010–11 school year.

“We haven't looked at special education in this state for more than two decades,” said state Sen. Leah Vukmir (R-Wauwatosa), who cosponsored the bill. “The testimony was so compelling from parents, I don’t know how you could look the other way and not support this.”

The bill would add another voucher program to the state's recently expanded one for poor children in Milwaukee and Racine.

“It’s hugely significant because it’s a statewide program, whereas other programs have been tied to geographic areas,” said Michael Ford, director of research for the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute. “Other parents, when they hear about choice, will be clamoring for it, but I think you’ll see some opposition based on that parochial instinct of public school districts.”

Defining Eligibility

The state Department of Public Instruction (DPI) must review a child's Individualized Education Plan to determine the scholarship amount he or she would receive.

“Currently all students with special needs have to have an IEP,” Vukmir said. “We saw this as the easiest way to identify [eligible students]. The IEP incorporates the concerns of parents, public school officials, and other experts.”

In the year preceding the application, a candidate must have attended a public school, a private school already accepting vouchers, or a school in another state.

To participate, private schools must be privately accredited or approved by the DPI. Every participating school must notify DPI and specify how many scholarship students it has room for. When slots are maxed out, the school must select applying students randomly.

Scholarships are limited to 5 percent of special-needs children in the state. Wisconsin public schools currently teach about 125,000 special-education students.

Other States as Models

Wisconsin is one of several states to pass legislation creating voucher programs for special-needs students in recent years. Between 8 and 14 percent of the children already participating in the state's voucher program for poor children in Milwaukee and Racine have special needs, Ford said.

“We'll see that [achievement] gap close if kids using vouchers have more choices,” he said.

Though initially similar to Florida's McKay Scholarship Program, AB110's public hearing in May shifted the language closer to Ohio's John Peterson Scholarship Program.

Ohio's special-needs scholarship program awards different levels of funding to students depending on the extent of their disability. The Wisconsin bill would instead give a student up to the statewide average spending per special-needs student or the cost of attending their new school, whichever is less, said Brian Pleva, Wisconsin government affairs associate for the American Federation for Children.

Tailoring Bill Language

Florida used preexisting line-item allocations for specific education services to set each child's scholarship figure, which made the calculation simpler and less subject to dispute, said Allison Hertog, a lawyer specializing in special education and a board member of a Florida nonprofit that grants scholarships to disabled children. The Wisconsin bill also requires some public school districts to provide transportation for voucher students.

“I could see that being controversial,” Hertog said.

Wisconsin's bill will require an annual financial report from participating schools, which the Florida program does not require.

“We should have it, but we don’t,” Hertog said. “It's very controversial because private schools do not want to submit a financial report. Not submitting one has, in some cases, led to scandal.”

Taxpayer Savings

Since the average cost of educating a special-needs student is above the bill's cap of $13,376, public schools will save money when a special-needs student transfers out, Vukmir said.

“In many cases private schools can educate special-needs students better and at a lower cost,” she said.

The cap was added in a bill amendment to protect public schools from losing too much money too quickly, Ford said.

“It’s extraordinarily expensive to educate these kids,” Hertog noted. She said the bill would allow Wisconsin special-needs students a maximum scholarship amount while getting a good education. Additional expenses for DPI personnel monitoring of participating schools have yet to be determined.

More Legislation Likely

If the bill passes, the resulting scholarship program will probably be amended to work better and expanded in years to come, Hertog said.

“If you look at the history of the McKay scholarship in Florida, it’s been amended, in small ways, pretty regularly in the past 10 years,” she said.

Such legislation recognizes parents' intimate knowledge of their children's needs, Pleva said.

“Whenever there’s a parent in Wisconsin who has a child with special needs and who is not happy with their current public school, they should have a right to take the money intended for their child and use it at the school of their choice,” he said. “They know better than anyone else what type of learning environment would be best for their children. This bill recognizes that.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
New Hampshire Debates Tax Credit Scholarships

By Vicki Alger

The New Hampshire Senate on March 21 passed a bill that would create a statewide education tax credit scholarship program.

Senate Bill 372 would allow nonprofit organizations to collect corporate donations for scholarships worth up to $2,500 so students from low- and middle-income families could attend the public or private school of their choice. Home-schooled students would be eligible for scholarships worth $625 for educational expenses.

Businesses would receive 85 percent of their donation amount as a credit against their tax liability. New Hampshire has no personal income or sales tax.

“Education tax credits enable more choices for parents, putting accountability for education directly in their hands,” said bill sponsor state Sen. Jim Forsythe (R-Strafford).

Want Religious Schools Excluded

Critics contend the program would be unconstitutional for allowing tax-deductible contributions to fund private schools.

“The New Hampshire constitution on taxes is unique,” said University of New Hampshire law professor Marcus Hurn. Since it bans public support for religious schools, he said, the state cannot allow tax credits that might help fund them, even indirectly.

Research by the Concord-based Josiah Bartlett Center, however, found similar tax credit scholarship programs in other states have withstood legal challenges. The proposed program “is constitutionally tested, fiscally prudent, and a remarkably powerful tool to improve public education in New Hampshire,” said Bartlett Center President Charlie Arlinghaus.

States, Courts Settle Doubts

Arizona became the first state to enact a tax credit scholarship program, in 1997. Since then, nine additional programs have been enacted across the country, benefitting approximately 82,000 students nationwide.

As in New Hampshire, the constitutions of 15 states with private school choice programs contain prohibitions against public support for religious schools. Courts have upheld these programs because the monies that fund the programs come from individuals or businesses, not state governments.

“If we start to question whether or not a tax credit is government money,” said Forsythe, “all of a sudden we’re looking at donations to charities, donations to church would be subject to that kind of scrutiny.”

A U.S. Supreme Court decision in April 2011 agreed with Forsythe’s reasoning. In that case, proponents of Arizona’s tax credit scholarships insisted private donations are actually government funds because donors were paying state taxes to nonprofit organizations instead of to the state government.

The court ruled in Arizona Christian School Tuition Organization v. Winn that this position “assumes that all income is government property, even if it has not come into the tax collector’s hands. That premise finds no basis in standing jurisprudence.”

Year’s ‘Most Important Bill’

The state Senate passed the bill 15–9. It is currently awaiting review from the Senate Finance Committee.

“This is the most important bill the legislature will pass this year,” said Arlinghaus. “[It] encourages businesses to use private dollars to support families searching for the right school for their children.”

Vicki Alger, Ph.D. (vicki@vickialger.com) is a senior fellow at the Independent Women’s Forum.

Milwaukee Teachers Union

Requests Gov. Walker’s Policies

By Joy Pullmann

At the request of the Milwaukee school district and teachers union, Wisconsin legislators approved a bill extending to the district the same policies that prompted union-backed petitions to recall Gov. Scott Walker, the lieutenant governor, and four state senators.

In response, the presidents and executive directors of union locals for the state’s largest school districts outside Milwaukee wrote a letter to the Milwaukee Teachers’ Education Association expressing their “grave concern” that supporting the legislation to help Milwaukee fill a massive budget gap could endanger the recall efforts.

“Such legislation will enable Governor Walker to claim victory of his policy to rein in public employee wages and benefits,” the letter says. “Allowing Governor Walker to make such a claim just before the recall election will prove detrimental to recalling him.”

The union leaders also wrote Milwaukee’s example could prompt their own districts to seek similar economic help from the legislature.

“The level of cynicism apparent in this letter is appalling,” said the state Assembly’s Assistant Majority Leader, Dan Knodl (R-German-town). “It seems Big Labor would rather see Milwaukee teachers laid off and funding cut from children’s classrooms than miss an opportunity to score points against Gov. Walker.”

The bill, which Walker has said he will sign, allows the Milwaukee school district and MTEA to reopen negotiations on their contract without canceling it.

The district will have trouble paying a $10 million pension payment without laying off teachers if it can’t renegotiate to cancel a scheduled pay raise, for example.

In March 2011, Walker cut state school spending to help fill a $3 billion deficit, promoting Act 10’s restrictions of collective bargaining to wages as a means for school districts to fill the holes in their budgets.

Unlike many Wisconsin school districts, Milwaukee did not require its employees to pay more for health insurance or anything toward pensions—it had rushed to close contract negotiations before Act 10 went into effect. At the time, the school district said using the measures in Act 10 and a related act would have prevented them from laying off 200 teachers.

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

PODCAST INFO


By Rachel Sheffield

A new study finds the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP)—the oldest and largest voucher program in the country—serves many more special-needs students than previous reports have stated.

Though the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction has estimated 1.6 percent of students participating in the MPCP are special-needs students, researchers Patrick J. Wolf, David J. Fleming, and John D. Witte conclude the correct figure is most likely between 9 and 11 percent.

“We’re quite certain that the 1.6 percent figure is low,” said Witte, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Nationally, roughly 5 percent of the K-12 student population are special-needs children.

“Opponents of the program have seized on [DPI’s] data,” explained Jim Bender, president of School Choice Wisconsin. “Most commonly, this is used to rebut an argument made by supporters of the MPCP that it gets the same or better results at half the cost. Opponents like to claim that the MPCP does not serve all students, as [the Milwaukee Public School system] is required to do.”

To get its figure, DPI counted a choice student as special needs if the student received a disability accommodation while taking the annual state test.

“DPI had to rely on the only data that they had,” said study author Patrick Wolf, of the University of Arkansas. That data, however, did not accurately reflect students in private schools, since “in the private schools many don’t have accommodations.”

The reason for this, the authors explain in their report, “Special Choices,” is that private schools operate under different rules than public schools. Public schools are legally obligated to identify special-needs students, and they receive extra funding for these students from federal and state governments.

Over the past 35 years, the number of students with special-needs designations has risen 60 percent. One in eight public school children receives special education services. The special-needs classification has grown most rapidly is also the mildest. It includes conditions like dyslexia and difficulty processing sight and sound. The number of students in this classification has grown 211 percent in the past 35 years, and today 38 percent of all special-education students are in this classification.

Private schools do not get extra government funds for educating special-needs students. For that reason, many private schools do not bother to identify those students and in fact often hesitate to do so because of the stigma that comes with the designation, Wolf said.

To get a more accurate accounting of the number of special-needs students MPCP serves, the researchers used methods “based on actual disability classifications of students from their time in [Milwaukee Public Schools] and in MPCP,” Wolf said. The researchers had access to a five-year database of MPCP students, which allowed them to compare the rate of special-needs designations for students who switched between MPCP and MPS, and vice versa.

For each student who attended both MPCP and MPS during the five years, the researchers asked school principals to indicate if a child had a special need. Based on both statistics, the researchers determined a weighted average, estimating anywhere from 7.5 to 14.6 percent of MPCP students likely had a special need.

The authors also surveyed parents of MPCP students, 11.4 percent of whom reported their child had special needs.

Bender says the study findings “take away the argument that the MPCP is selective when it comes to students with disabilities.”

“[Choice schools] having far more students with disabilities actually creates a new issue for discussion,” he said. “The MPCP schools already receive far less for a student without a need for special services, but are actually serving thousands of students with special needs on $6,442, far less than public schools spend per child.”

Rachel Sheffield (rachel.sheffield@heritage.org) is an education research assistant at The Heritage Foundation.
La. Lawmakers Pass Nation’s Broadest Choice Bills

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also important for America. If we want to preserve the American dream for our children, if we want them to do better than we did, then it is important they get a great education.”

Louisiana currently spends approximately $12,000 annually per student and ranks 49th in overall education performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Implementation Challenges
Most of the legislation is set to go into effect this fall. The teacher tenure changes will wait until a new evaluation system is available for 2013–14, which will calculate the “value-added” boost a specific teacher gives to each student’s test scores.

Students statewide from families at 250 percent of the poverty line, or approximately $60,000 for a family of four, will be eligible for a voucher. Nearly 400,000 students will qualify.

State teachers unions have promised a legal challenge to the voucher program.

Gubernatorial Leadership
Jindal (R) made the education bills his top legislative priority for this year, announcing his support for them after months of public and private discussions with teachers, superintendents, school board members, and policy analysts.

“Gov. Jindal and state lawmakers have demonstrated a clear commitment to prioritize the educational rights of Louisiana’s next generation above all else,” said State Superintendent John White.

The governor’s leadership has been essential to moving the bills forward, said Matthew Ladner, research director at the Foundation for Excellence in Education.

Jindal acknowledged protests at the capitol from teachers union members, public school advocates, and some lawmakers, but he did not apologize for his policy stance.

“I was elected to help lead our state,” he said. “I was not elected just to hold an office.”

Two more bills from the governor’s agenda await votes. One would organize state oversight of publicly funded preschool programs. Another would give individuals and corporations state tax rebates for donating to nonprofit organizations that grant private school scholarships.

Jindal has put the full weight of his office behind the effort,” he said. “Gov. Jindal is setting a bold example for other governors to follow in his all-out effort to improve public education.”

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

House Bill 974: 
Teacher Quality and Tenure

Teachers rated “ineffective” would lose tenure and could face dismissal. The teacher could appeal the rating to a panel of educators and the courts.

New teachers, and those not now tenured, must be rated “effective” for five out of six years to earn tenure.

Abolishes school boards’ ability to select teachers and personnel, giving superintendents and principals that authority.

Bans using seniority as the only factor in layoffs.

Allows local administrators to revamp pay schedules to include teacher effectiveness, subject demand, and school location, rather than seniority and credentialing.

Bans pay raises for teachers rated “ineffective.”

House Bill 976: 
Charter Schools and Vouchers

Expands voucher eligibility to all Louisiana students attending “C,” “D,” and “F”-rated schools whose family income does not exceed 250 percent of the federal poverty level.

Covers up to 380,000 students.

State-funded students in private and parochial schools take certain standardized state tests. The state Board of Education may require those students to pass the state test in their grade level to move to the next grade.

Parent Trigger: 51 percent of parents in an “F”-rated school district can vote to require that their school be converted to a charter after three years of failure.

Community groups, nonprofits, universities, and local groups that meet state qualifications can be authorized to approve charter schools. Also creates standard application for charter school applicants statewide.


Louisiana Surveys Indicate High Public Support for Vouchers

By Joy Pullmann

Two recent surveys of Louisiana parents and voters reveal high satisfaction with the New Orleans voucher system and overall approval of major components of Gov. Bobby Jindal’s education reform proposals.

“The program is exactly what I was looking for,” said Deetta Holmes, mother of a Louisiana voucher student. “I wish the entire education system could operate on the same level and quality of this program. Every child should experience this type of education.”

Sixty percent of Louisiana voters supported expanding the state’s voucher program for low- and middle-income families, while 30 percent opposed the idea, according to a poll released by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice and the Pelican Institute for Public Policy.

Ninety-three percent of parents with children currently enrolled in the New Orleans voucher program say they are “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the schools their children attend, according to the most recent annual poll from the Louisiana Black Alliance for Educational Options. Ninety-four percent are happy with their child’s academic progress. Ninety-nine percent of respondents said their child feels safe and welcome in his or her charter school.

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

The Heartland Institute is organizing its seventh International Conference on Climate Change – a gathering of scientists and economists from around the world to share their research and shed light on what is really happening to the Earth’s climate, and what to do about it.

Don’t miss this important conference! Details are available at heartland.org and climateconference.heartland.org.

“Skeptics dispute climate worries”
NEW YORK TIMES

“The tide of the debate—at least politically—has turned in their favor.”
U. S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT

“In the words of Gandhi, ‘First they ignore you, then they mock you, then they fight you, then you win.’”
CANADA FREE PRESS

“The Heartland Institute, a Chicago-based think tank devoted to ‘promoting free-market solutions,’ has been holding these confabs since 2008, sometimes twice a year. And the strategy appears to be working.”
THE NATION

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Bargaining Curbs Save Wisconsin Schools Millions

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inflation.

“Act 10, or at least some form of it, was desperately needed,” the report quotes Glenn Schilling, superintendent of Hartland-Lakeside schools, as saying. “Collective bargaining is outdated. Things that made sense 20 or 30 years ago no longer make sense. But to get things out of the contract and make needed changes was impossible.”

Budget Emergency
Facing a $3 billion budget deficit, Walker cut state school spending by $555 per student, advocating the collective bargaining restrictions as a door to balanced budgets for districts that had to cover shortfalls.

Act 10 also let districts require public employees to contribute up to 12.6 percent of their salaries to health insurance and 5.8 percent to pensions. Both figures are just below the averages of what private workers in the state pay for the same benefits.

Because of these requirements, the ten school districts that saved the most this fiscal year together saved $85.6 million, according to figures from the MacIver Institute.

“Hundreds of school districts saved a great deal of money,” the report says, “which helped them absorb the blow of reduced tax revenue. Those savings would not have occurred without Act 10.”

Freedom for School Districts
Before Act 10, unions could negotiate with districts on nearly any detail of school organization or spending. The report details how pre-Act 10 arbitration systems locked school districts into unwanted, unwieldy practices and high spending.

“The tools given to us were absolutely necessary,” New Berlin finance director Roger Dickson told the report authors. “We could have been facing cuts in programs, increasing class sizes, and a watered-down curriculum.”

In New Berlin, the teacher salary schedule was set so teachers could move from a $38,000 salary to $78,000 annually in nine years. Until Act 10 went into effect, union officials refused to revisit the schedule or an expensive early retirement program, even though the school district was broke. Using the act as leverage, the school board was finally able to renegotiate.

Concessions Wisconsin Teachers Unions Refused
- Milwaukee: Cash-strapped district wanted to drop health insurance coverage for Viagra, which cost taxpayers $786,000 per year.
- Milwaukee: Switch to a less expensive employee health care plan at no cost to employees, saving $48 million and 480 teaching jobs.
- New Berlin: Contract proposal with pay increase one year and wage freeze another to help eliminate $2.1 million deficit and save 27 teaching jobs.
- Milton: Switch employee health insurance carrier. Employees would get comparable coverage and the district would save about $450,000 each year.

Little Evidence of K-12 Budget Cuts
There is no denying that teacher layoffs have occurred over the past three years. But the constant cries of education spending being cut to the bone are difficult to square with figures in the National Education Association’s most recent Rankings & Estimates, which show uninterrupted spending increases.

Let’s look at the past ten years for convenience, and the past three to examine the effects of the national recession. In 2001–02 there were 2,991,724 K-12 classroom teachers and 47,360,963 K-12 students. K-12 per-pupil spending averaged $7,676.

Ten years later, there were almost 7 percent more teachers and only 4 percent more students. Per-pupil spending was $10,976—a 43 percent increase (12.6 percent in inflation-adjusted dollars).

If we compare this year’s numbers to three years ago, we see an enrollment increase of 0.5 percent, a teacher reduction of 0.4 percent, and an increase in per-pupil spending of 6 percent (1.5 percent in constant dollars).

If we accept that many school districts are spending less than they were three years ago, the national averages force us to accept that many more are still spending more.

Mike Antonucci (mike@eionline.com) directs the Education Intelligence Agency, on whose blog this originally appeared. Reprinted with permission.

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- Milton: Switch employee health insurance carrier. Employees would get comparable coverage and the district would save about $450,000 each year.

Union Budget Obstruction
Since 1998, average teacher benefits more than doubled statewide, to $27,053 per year, while average teacher salaries increased by approximately one-quarter, from $37,897 to $50,627. Both increased every year, despite the recent recession, according to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

“Arbitrators could force school districts to give their union employees large raises without strongly considering whether the schools or local taxpayers could afford such an expenditure,” the report notes.

The report lists many instances across the state of union officials obstructing school boards’ efforts to balance budgets, keep taxes low, and maintain education quality for students. It also discusses many bargaining agreements that required schools to purchase expensive, union-affiliated health insurance rather than shopping around.

During the current school year, despite cuts but with the new ability to negotiate health care costs and other benefits, districts had 1,799 more new hires than teachers they laid off or saw retire, according to the state Department of Public Instruction.

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

INTERNET INFO
Minn. Passes Bills Modifying K-12 Teacher Tenure

By Casey Cheney

The Minnesota House and Senate recently passed separate legislation ending last-in, first-out rules for teacher layoffs.

“It is going to help districts keep their more effective teachers,” said Jim Bartholomew, education policy director for the Minnesota Business Partnership. Once the two legislative bodies reconcile their bills, the proposal will go to Gov. Mark Dayton (D), who has promised a veto.

State Rep. Branden Petersen (R-Andover), author of House File 1870, said the legislation logically followed from a teacher evaluation law the state passed last year. The three-year evaluation process that law instituted, which factors in individual student performance and requires principals to rank teachers as “ineffective,” “effective,” or “highly effective,” would not influence layoff decisions until 2017.

That law is the first of its kind in Minnesota, he added. HF 1870 would allow principals to make hiring and firing decisions based on teacher evaluations using the new system. Minnesota is currently one of only approximately a dozen states that make seniority the sole determinant in teacher layoffs.

The Controversy

“We were hoping this wouldn’t be a hugely controversial idea, but unfortunately it has [been],” Bartholomew said. Even so, the bill moved quickly through the legislature, he said, and it received support from many and diverse organizations.

Petersen said opponents fear the bill will allow administrators to play favorites in layoffs or let teachers go based on the size of their salary.

“If they can’t negotiate something, they’ll have to use the state model,” Bartholomew said. “This is built on what’s hopefully a very local input.”

The state-level task force developing the teacher evaluation method consists of 35 members, only four of whom aren’t in education. Bartholomew said eight members are local union heads, and the others are teachers, superintendents, and the like.

As for any claims the existing local negotiations render the bill unnecessary, Bartholomew produced evidence to the contrary: Three Minnesota teachers of the year were recently laid off, as was one district teacher of the year.

Invasion of Privacy?

Dr. Karen Effrem, president of Education Liberty Watch, expressed concerns about longitudinal data systems. “No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, violates the privacy of student and teacher alike, she said.

“Using the Tools Available

Of all the objections he’s heard, Petersen said he had never heard Effrem’s, and it was a bit of a surprise.

“That’s a separate issue entirely,” he said of longitudinal data. “Whatever your tool is in a district, those things that are attached to the quality of instruction ought to be used.”

Teachers can’t be evaluated objectively without using data, which would end transparency of education funds, which are the largest “public investment,” he explained.

“Shouldn’t we have an understanding of how we’re educating?” he asked. “To me that’s a conservative idea.”

Casey Cheney (caseyrcheney@gmail.com) is a writer and graduate of Hillsdale College.

New Colorado Law Further Defines Teacher, Principal Evaluations

By Ashley Bateman

A new Colorado law builds on previous attempts to reform evaluations, setting six standards for measuring teacher effectiveness and making tenure contingent on continued “effective” ratings.

Lt. Gov. Joe Garcia said the law “gives a stamp of approval to a range of guiding rules” from a 2010 law.

“So we’ve been working at this for a while now,” Garcia said.

Widespread Support

HB 1001, signed into law February 15, further defines teacher and principal evaluations. It won 99 of 100 votes in the state’s General Assembly.

The law establishes teachers must be rated “effective” for three consecutive years before earning tenure. Teachers who receive “ineffective” ratings two years in a row can lose tenure.

The state department of education is working with nearly 30 school districts that will pilot the evaluation system in 2012–13.

‘Needed to Be Revamped’

“In many school districts, 99 or 98 percent of teachers are being rated ‘effective,’” said Ben DeGrow, senior education policy analyst for the Independence Institute. “The system needed to be revamped.”

An appeals process for teachers threatened with loss of tenure is still on the drawing board.

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

PODCAST

Study Says Federal Aid Spikes College Tuition

By Casey Cheney

For-profit colleges accepting federal aid charge, on average, 75 percent more tuition than those that don’t accept the aid, a National Bureau of Economic Research study has found.

The results suggest federal college subsidies raise the cost of college significantly, as critics have charged for decades.

“This is the first paper that really found strong evidence of the existence of a price difference caused by federal financial aid,” said Robert Archibald, a professor of economics at the College of William and Mary.

The study, titled “Does Federal Student Aid Raise Tuition?” was written by Stephanie Cellini, an assistant professor at George Washington University, and Harvard University Professor of Economics Claudia Goldin.

The importance of its findings, Archibald said, is twofold.

“It’s going have a huge impact in the debate over the Bennett Hypothesis. People whose ideological persuasions are that federal aid may crowd other aid out, they’re really going to like this,” he said.

But he says he doubts it will change much in the for-profit sector because “people paying different prices for the same commodity doesn’t last very long.”

Free Money for Colleges

The Bennett Hypothesis says institutions will raise tuition above the cost of education to capture as much federal aid as they can.

“The difference in tuition] seems to be similar to the average student Pell Grant award,” Cellini said.

Cellini said their research finds little evidence the higher price of subsidized institutions comes from anything other than subsidies.

Impact on Competition

Cellini, Goldin, and Archibald all say there’s no evidence this inflation hurts competition in the for-profit market. In addition, Goldin said, there’s little evidence schools that accept federal aid offer a better education.

Many non-Title IV schools—those that do not accept federal aid—are thriving, the report says. Such schools account for half the for-profit sector, which other studies have missed because “they are not captured in official U.S. Department of Education counts, offer mainly non-degree programs, and are far smaller than their Title IV counterparts.”

“Somehow they’re able to survive,” Archibald said. “And that’s the puzzle. How could you survive if the competition has this huge advantage over you? That suggests that either it’s not going to last or there’s something about the cost structure that’s different.”

Different Models

Goldin said accepting federal aid isn’t worth the hassle for many institutions, especially those not aimed at low-income students, such as Internet technology schools.

Because the researchers didn’t examine how schools that receive federal aid spend it, they can’t draw conclusions for traditional colleges and universities, Cellini emphasized.

“We don’t really know the reasons for these differences, but we know they exist,” she said.

Federal grants “grease the wheels and gears of education,” Cellini added, allowing low-income students a chance at higher education.

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Casey Cheney (caseyrcheney@gmail.com) is a writer and graduate of Hillsdale College.
Many High Schools Offer Poor Curricula

By Sally Nelson

Many high schools do not offer sufficiently rigorous curricula to graduate college- or career-ready students, a new report by the Center for Public Education concludes. The report notes 3,000 high schools—approximately one in nine high schools in the nation—offer no classes in Algebra II, a subject tested on the SAT and important for college preparation. Those schools serve approximately 500,000 students.

"[The report] confirms and echoes what other reports have been saying," said Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia. The nation needs better high school curricula to regenerate the economy, he said, as approximately 25 percent of high schoolers currently drop out and 50 percent of those who graduate are unready for college or career.

"We have 3 million unfilled jobs that people could be filling but don’t have the skill level necessary," Wise said.

Strategies for Improvement

The study presented four “popular” strategies to prepare students for college-level work: Advanced Placement courses, dual enrollment, early college programs, and higher-level math.

To improve high school curricula, the authors recommend increasing access to quality education, equity between schools, more funding, advocacy for better curricula, and data collection.

“Clearly, there needs to be more advanced learning for all students. We have to change the education system. We have to use technology in ways that we haven’t used it before.”

BOB WISE, PRESIDENT, ALLIANCE FOR EXCELLENT EDUCATION
FORMER GOVERNOR - WEST VIRGINIA

Solving Equity Problems

The report highlights equal access as a key problem: Many students cannot get better classes because the public school they are required to attend does not offer them.

"[Online] learning can be very beneficial in bridging gaps because you don’t have to worry about geographic boundaries," said Matthew Wicks, a vice president for the International Association for K-12 Online Learning. "If school district X doesn’t offer AP courses, a student can take it online."

Wise said teacher distribution is another problem, noting there are only 88 certified physics teachers for Alabama’s 440 high schools.

Harnessing Technology

The study’s suggestions would require costly increases in personnel. Wicks said online learning is more efficient than hiring AP or foreign language teachers for every school, since many schools will “never have enough demand to justify these courses.”

Schools must harness technology wisely instead of simply layering it on the existing system, which will only increase costs, he said.

“This is the time for every school district to power up, not power down,” he said.

Sally Nelson (sallynelson7@gmail.com) writes from Hillsdale, Michigan.

Idaho Lifts Caps on Charter Schools

By Rachel Sheffield

Idaho Gov. C.L. Otter signed a bill to lift the state’s cap on the number of new charter schools allowed to open each year.

“Idaho does not rank very high among states with charter schools and corresponding charter school laws,” noted state Rep. Bob Nonini (R-Coeur d’Alene), the bill’s sponsor.

The new law overrides two charter school caps in the state: Only six could have opened each year, and no more than one could have opened in any school district each year. Nonini also noted the state’s “arduous” chartering process and charters’ inability to raise money through property taxes, public bonds, or levies though they are fully public schools. The state funds charters only with per-pupil allotted funding.

Those policies have limited charter school success in Idaho, he said.

“There are many private charitable foundations that shy away from giving money to Idaho charter schools because of the cap on new schools,” he said. The new policy would make “Idaho charter schools and new charter schools trying to open more attractive to the foundations that support the charter movement nationally.”

Currently, 7,000 Idaho students are wait-listed for charter school seats, said Melissa McGrath, an Idaho State Department of Education spokesperson. She noted the number of students on charter wait lists is the same as five years ago. The state currently has 43 charter schools in operation.

The steady demand by Idaho families to get into charter schools is evidence “students and families want more choices in public education,” McGrath said.

Charter schools meet that goal of providing increased public education options, says Stephanie Grisham, spokesperson for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

“Children are all different when it comes to food, interests, development, and definitely in the way they learn,” Grisham said. “Charter schools offer different curriculums that can be tailored to a child’s needs. There are Montessori schools, STEM schools, charters that focus on the arts or back to basics. Additionally, charter schools are able to ‘turn on a dime’ and make changes to various programs, unlike the traditional schools that generally have to go through the district.”

Grisham added, “raising caps would allow more children [and] families to attend the school of their choosing and allow further quality operators to open their doors.”

Rachel Sheffield (rachel.sheffield@heritage.org) is an education research assistant at The Heritage Foundation.
Why Common Core Won’t Boost Learning

By Lindsey Burke

The Common Core State Standards Initiative is unlikely to improve academic quality and very questionable legality, the simple fact is that the proponents of national education standards never even bothered to tell states what this unfunded federal mandate will cost them,” said Jamie Gass, director of the Pioneer Institute’s Center for School Reform. “Our cost estimates place national standards in the neighborhood of $16 billion.”

The study demonstrates the Common Core and its “accompanying assessment and data collection schemes” will not benefit students, said Emmett McGroarty, a senior fellow for the American Principles Project.

“It’s time for the federal government to butt out. It’s time to recommit ourselves to the Constitution and return education policymaking to states and localities, where it is closest to parents.”

Loveless notes the Common Core has been “backed enthusiastically” by the Obama administration. The U.S. Department of Education has required states to adopt “career- and college-ready standards” to receive Race to the Top grants and waivers of No Child Left Behind, and the department contends the core is the only set of standards currently available that qualifies.

Not a Solution

In his assessment of the Common Core’s likely impact, Loveless concludes with a strong warning not to expect it will improve academic achievement.

“Just as the glow of consensus surrounding NCLB faded after a few years, cracks are now appearing in the wall of support for the Common Core,” he said. “Don’t let the ferocity of the oncoming debate fool you. The empirical evidence suggests that the Common Core will have little effect on American students’ achievement. The nation will have to look elsewhere for ways to improve its schools.”

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

Fla. Bill Equalizes Charter Funding

By Ashley Bateman

Florida Senate Bill 1852 would require school boards to share federal funding for property costs with charter schools, which often set up shop in churches, empty strip malls, or other alternative locales. The bill passed out of the state Senate PreK-12 education committee and awaits a floor vote.

The measure also mandates that when students transfer from a traditional public school to a public charter school, state taxpayer funding, upwards of $6,000 per student, will transfer with them.

“Parents are choosing to send their children to charter schools in droves, and those children deserve to be in a decent facility,” said Stephanie Grisham, a spokesperson for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. “A charter school does not want to be in a strip mall.”

Another provision in the bill requires federal funding for charters sent to a district school board to be fully distributed within 60 days of receipt.

Biggest Disparity in Nation

Florida has one of the nation’s highest funding disparities between traditional and charter schools.

“Our PreK-12 education policy assesses and recommends changes to the state’s charter school funding program, which was passed in 2011,” Shamon said. “The bill will likely lead to more charter schools opening, which can help address the state’s charter school waiting list, now at more than 5,000 names.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@gmail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
Common Core Poses Legal Questions

By Lindsey Burke

A new report by former U.S. Department of Education officials questions the legality of federal support for the Common Core State Standards Initiative, a set of education standards critics say will lead to a national curriculum and tests.

The report, “The Road to a National Curriculum,” concludes the Obama administration “has simply paid others to do that which it is forbidden to do.”

“The concern is that the assessments developed by the two Race to the Top-funded consortia will end up illegally directing the course of elementary and secondary curriculum across the nation,” said report coauthor Kent Talbert.

The report, from the Pioneer Institute for Public Policy Research, carries significant weight because of its authors. Talbert is former general counsel for the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) and chief legal advisor to former Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, and Bob Eitel is a former deputy general counsel for the agency. Bill Evers, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education and now a Hoover Institution scholar, also contributed.

“The paper establishes how, through the Race to the Top fund, the RTTT Assessment Program, and federal waivers of No Child Left Behind, the USDOE is pushing states to adopt standards and assessments that are favored by the department,” said Pioneer Institute Executive Director Jim Stergios.

Breaking Federal Laws

Forty-five states have adopted the Common Core, which currently consists of grade-level math and language arts requirements. The Obama administration required applicants for Race to the Top grants and for waivers of No Child Left Behind’s most punitive provisions to adopt the standards. The report alleges tying these strings to federal favors shows significant federal involvement in implementing the Common Core nationwide.

The organizations developing the Common Core and related tests are funded by the DOE. That consortium is also “helping” states move to national standards and assessments, as well as developing ‘curriculum frameworks’ and ‘instructional modules,’” Stergios said.

Those actions, the authors argue, break three laws that prohibit federal involvement in curriculum: the General Education Provisions Act, the Department of Education Organization Act, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

“I hate to be so blunt, but the U.S. Department of Education is violating three federal laws,” Stergios said. “And the fact is that state and local officials who are part of the national standards and assessment efforts are compliant in the breaking of these federal laws.”

Education Secretary Condemns Critics

Education Secretary Arne Duncan in February condemned such criticisms in his first direct statement on the controversy.

“The idea that the Common Core standards are nationally imposed is a conspiracy theory in search of a conspiracy,” he said. “The Common Core academic standards were both developed and adopted by the states, and they have widespread bipartisan support.”

The report’s authors flatly disagreed, citing federal law and the department’s actions contrary to Duncan’s statements.

“Our greatest concern arises from the department’s decision to cement the use of the Common Core State Standards and these assessment consortia through conditional NCLB waivers. It doesn’t have statutory authority to impose these conditions,” Eitel said.

‘Nationalizing Education’

The Obama administration’s push for the Common Core effectively nationalizes the content taught in local schools, said Lance Izumi, senior education analyst at The Heritage Foundation.

Izumi said studies on the Common Core show they are no better than existing state standards and are, “in a number of cases, significantly weaker.”

“The Common Core is likely to stamp out diversity in education, Evers said. “This uniformity in curriculum will stifle innovation and prevent states from competing with each other to have the best and most solid curriculum,” he concluded.

“Instead of nationalizing education as the president wants to do, the better solution is to decentralize education,” Izumi said. “Empowering parents is the revolution that America truly needs.”

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

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Elite Soccer Teams Separate from School Sports

By Ashley Bateman

Top young soccer players around the nation will now have to choose between playing a short season with top teams or a longer season with their public school home team.

The United States Soccer Federation recently announced it would extend its Development Academy season to nearly year-round to match international competition, essentially removing participants' ability to participate in school sports since most school teams require exclusive play.

“High school certainly has a place in the soccer landscape in this country, and the elite players who are looking to reach the higher level, we feel that the academy provides that environment,” said Neil Beuthe, USSF senior manager for communications. “The concept of a longer season and providing an opportunity for the players to be in an environment that we thought would help their development, we figured that was a positive thing to move toward.”

“It is disappointing that kids could be asked to make this kind of choice,” said Tim Stried, director of information services for the Ohio High School Athletic Association, which includes both public and private schools. “Playing for your school and community is special, and the OHSAA strives to protect that opportunity.”

The decision marks the first significant decoupling of a high school league from the public school system.

“It’s an interesting change over the past 10, 12 years,” said Jeff Paterson, president of California Home School Sports and a public school physical education teacher. “Kids are feeling they might get a better scholarship if they play in a travel [or] club team.”

Small Number Affected

Seventy-eight U.S. teams, representing approximately 4,000 students, currently participate in the Development Academy. Most are on the East and West Coasts. That number is approximately 1 percent of high school students, Beuthe said, meaning local teams will not be heavily affected right away.

For now, he said, the USSF does not plan a huge increase in numbers but will focus on growth over time.

“We want to be able to manage [expansion] the right way,” Beuthe said.

Global Competition

The longer season “is consistent with how games are played around the world,” Beuthe said. Schools in California have participated in an extended season for several years. Maria Ishida, executive director of the California Interscholastic Federation, met with USSF representatives to voice concerns about the shift.

“Basically, we agreed to disagree because [Americans] weren’t winning a World Cup,” Ishida said.

Before separating the Development Academy teams from schools, the USSF studied how the world’s best soccer countries improved their young players and found they did so with tiered teams and frequent, more competitive games.

Social Separation?

Though many players and parents view the academy teams as an opportunity, others voice concerns about separating school and club sports.

“We want kids to be able to compete in as many sports as they can throughout the school year,” Ishida said. “Socially there’s just so much going on that the more activities the kids get involved in the better. We also felt that playing or practicing too much wasn’t a good thing for the individual kid. So we’ve tried to limit them—during the season of sports, they can’t play for an outside team.”

Beuthe said students who play for the academy don’t lose the social benefits of school, since they spend most of their day at school anyway.

Potential for Injury

For top homeschooled soccer athletes, the USSF academies may offer an opportunity, said Paterson. Homeschool leagues often have difficulty fielding top competition and renting facilities, he noted. But he voiced another concern of year-round training: more injuries.

“It’s kind of a negative because of that emphasis on one muscle group for that one sport,” he said. “You’ll see more knee injuries in basketball players, elbows in a baseball player—so I’m concerned about that.”

Paterson and Ishida said younger players often benefit more from playing several sports rather than focusing intensely on one.

“We really like the balanced approach,” Paterson said. “In our home school leagues we encourage families to choose at least two sports. It’s an important part of our philosophy.”

Growing Specialization

Paterson said he has noticed an increase in soccer players choosing to play for club teams.

“We find more and more kids specializing whether we like it or not,” Ishida said. “The other side is it opens up more spots for other kids to play. There are thousands of other kids to take their place. I don’t know whether we know yet the total ramifications of it.”

As more top athletes opt for USSF Development Academy teams, public opinion may shift, she said.

“The academy teams were [previously] isolating their seasons to that winter season,” Ishida said. “Now that they’re going year-round it’s going to affect everybody. There might be a more of an outcry throughout the United States. It’s so new to people I think it will take them a year or two to go through the cycle for kids and parents to complain.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
West Virginia Considers Alternative Certification

By Sally Nelson

West Virginia lawmakers are working to pass bills that address teacher shortages by creating alternative paths to teacher certification.

The House of Delegates recently passed two bills allowing college graduates without degrees in education to work toward a teaching certificate. The bills now face Senate deliberation.

Currently, West Virginia has a shortage of approximately 1,700 teachers, said bill sponsor Del. David Perry (D-Fayette).

“There is a fundamental shortage of math, science, and special-education teachers. In counties like McDowell County, though, there is a shortage in all areas,” Perry said.

In the 2011–12 school year, all 55 counties in West Virginia reported a teacher shortage, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Perry said he hopes the bill will give rise to at least 100 more teachers a year.

Certification While Working

House Bills 4122 and 101 would authorize alternative methods of teacher certification for college graduates. The new routes allow graduates to start working as teachers while earning certification through classes and mentoring.

To become a certified teacher in West Virginia currently, a prospective teacher must fulfill accreditation requirements before student teaching.

“Traditionally certified teachers complete their coursework and practice teaching before becoming a teacher,” said James Shuls, a Doctoral Academy fellow at the University of Arkansas.

“But with the alternative route, you begin teaching immediately but you are still required to do some coursework in your first few years of teaching.”

“With the alternative route, you begin teaching immediately but you are still required to do some coursework in your first few years of teaching,” said Shuls. “A system like that won't bring about the kind of change it requires principals to choose whatever candidate comes along with traditional certification. If that traditional candidate doesn’t come around, principals can then hire the alternatively certified candidate,” said Shuls. “A system like that wouldn't bring about the kind of change they are looking for.”

Alternative vs. Traditional

Some programs that require extensive coursework for alternative certification lose what differentiates them from traditional programs, Shuls said.

Most alternative certification routes mimic typical college requirements, defeating the purpose of the alternative methods, say Chester Finn Jr. and Michael Petrilli in a report for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

“So alternative certification has been co-opted, compromised, and diluted,” they write. “Education schools—brilliantly turning a threat into an opportunity—have themselves come to dominate this enterprise, blurring the distinctions that once made it ‘alternative.’”

Alternative Certification Works

Studies comparing traditionally certified teachers and alternatively certified teachers find no major differences between the two, Shuls said.

“The two groups are really close in average quality,” he said. “Every study, though, shows a wide variation in both groups. There are some teachers that are great and there are some that are bad in both groups.”

The benefit of alternative certification, Perry and Shuls agree.

“When we open up other pathways, we are increasing the supply of people that could be teaching. We're giving principals the power to be pickier with who they're selecting,” Shuls said. “It gives an ability to improve the overall quality of the teaching profession.”

The most successful teacher training programs recruit the highest-performing individuals, Shuls noted. Alternative certification allows administrators to choose from individuals with degrees in a variety of areas, not just education.

“You can attract the top of the class from some of the best schools who want to teach for a few years,” Shuls said. “Alternative certification allows us to draw from that pool of people who might not consider teaching for their entire lives but might consider it for a period. It also reduces barriers to entry for individuals wanting to change professions.”

Sally Nelson (sallynelson7@gmail.com) writes from Hillsdale, Michigan.
End Social Promotion, Introduce Independent Testing

By David Anderson and Herbert J. Walberg

Public schools’ tradition of social promotion—promoting children to the next grade despite their lack of academic knowledge and skills—degrades U.S. school quality.

Whether judged by the state departments’ of education proficiency standards or by the well-regarded National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), large numbers of public school children in the United States cannot do grade-level work. By any of these measures, an unacceptable number of children are behind. NAEP reveals, for example, nearly two-thirds of eighth-grade children test below the proficiency level, meaning most of them have been socially promoted.

The requirements for promotion in the typical public school classroom are significantly more lax than those of state assessment systems. When schools have such low expectations for their students, it is not surprising schools pass forward large numbers of children who are later found to be below grade level.

Allowing teachers and principals to set the criteria for passing is a tradition of American K-12 education, both public and private. Parents, employers, and policymakers do not often see the conflict of interest in having the same people provide instruction and test its effects.

We don’t accept that tradition. We believe that a child should pass to the next grade or next course only if that student can do the next grade’s work. Students below proficiency should not pass to the next grade level.

Causes of Rampant Social Promotion

Why are there so many socially promoted children? First, grade-level standards are low and the usual tests do not meet NAEP, international, and similar standards. The content schools teach and test is incomplete or narrow relative to such standards. This testing employs low cut scores that are inconsistent with a reasonable level of mastery in the subject.

In addition, with growing recognition of poor K-12 standards and demands for better achievement, serious problems of cheating by educators have risen. Educators have given students a “heads-up” about what questions they will find on “high-stakes” tests. They have deliberately overlooked student cheating on tests and have even been found to alter test results.

Most of these abuses stem from the self-interest of students, teachers, school administrators, and other government officials who benefit from a “look good” system. We contend that having the testing function managed by the same people charged with providing instruction leads to a fundamental conflict of interest, which encourages the problems cited.

Solving the Conflict of Interest

Our solution to this set of problems foresees establishing a separate agency within each state that would set academic content standards, develop relevant assessments, manage and proctor test administration, and control who passes and graduates and what transcripts report. These reforms would be limited to core curricular areas and would not affect elective subjects.

We also propose that, where practical, the content standards of each state’s public education system would be minimally aligned with the NAEP, which would generally surpass the state’s current proficiency standards. We avoid the controversial and underdeveloped Common Core standards, which appear to be weaker than the NAEP’s.

We are optimistic that such independent testing can be established without too many impediments. We cite the example of Advanced Placement courses, given at the high school level, where an independent testing service (the College Board) administers the tests.

Disrupting the Mediocre Status Quo

Suppose this were to be done. What would happen?

We anticipate that schools would initially find themselves with large majorities of children unable to pass the tests associated with their studies. Given that the new system would prevent social promotion, many children would face retention. The status quo would be disrupted.

Schools would then need to focus a significant fraction of their resources on remedial instruction. In fact, we believe that the true, yet unspoken, reason for social promotion has been the high costs of remediation, not the feel-good student social relations rationale usually given. If schools had to accomplish this through traditional instruction, they might not be able to afford the additional instructional load.

Fortunately, we now have inexpensive alternatives for remediation. Many of them make use of computers and online instruction that students can access both within the school and at home.

The outcome we anticipate is a K-12 environment where testing and certification of student skills will be honest and rigorous. Implementing these changes will cause disruption in the schools that, in turn, will motivate changes in instructional practices that will lead to improved student knowledge and skill levels.

In 2009 the U.S. secretary of education, Arne Duncan, called the gross exaggerations of most states’ K-12 assessment systems “lying.” The truthful systems proposed here will help parents, children, and other stakeholders better know students’ true shortcomings and strengths. Based on that knowledge, schools can take the needed corrective actions.

The expected results: Student proficiencies in the 90 percent range on the NAEP scale.

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