By Evelyn B. Stacey

Approximately 11,000 Alabama children attending failing public schools can receive private funds to attend private school now that Gov. Robert Bentley has signed a school choice bill.

In March, the state supreme court lifted a restraining order on the bill. Teachers union officials who previously won the restraining order promised they will immediately sue again to stop the program.

“No student should be forced to remain in a school that cannot provide a quality education, and this law allows flexibility and choice for those students,” said bill sponsor state Sen. Bill Holtzclaw (R-Madison), noting his child currently attends public school.

Often these families find themselves locked into a cycle of poverty as well, and school choice can break that cycle.”

The measure makes Alabama the 22nd state to allow private school choice and the 11th to allow it through public school funds.

“No student should be forced to remain in a school that cannot provide a quality education, and this law allows flexibility and choice for those students.”

BILL HOLTZCLAW
STATE SENATOR
MADISON, ALABAMA
Ind. Lawmakers Keep Common Core Measure Alive

By Joy Pullmann

A bill to hold public hearings in Indiana on Common Core standards and to require a cost analysis wasn’t getting past House Education Committee Chairman Bob Behning (R-Indianapolis). So Senate lawmakers, who passed the bill 38–11, have tackled the measure on to another bill to get the House to consider it.

Ohio vouchers challenged on the same grounds. The Colorado court also ruled in upholding a similar reasoning in upholding the program, said board president John Carson.

In 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court decided not to renew its teachers union contract in 2012, instead opting to contract with teachers individually, said Ben DeGraw, a senior education policy analyst for the Independence Institute. “[The union] sees the extra choice the board is giving parents as a lever [the union can use] to create discord and try to win back the school board,” he said. Four of the board’s seven seats are up for election this fall.

Barnard points to polls showing many Douglas County parents do not support the voucher program, but Carson notes “our school board has been reelected by wide margins in several consecutive elections.”

Douglas County parents often mistakenly believe vouchers take money from public schools, said Barnes, although the program actually increases public school coffers because each voucher is less than per-pupil state funding.

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is managing editor of School Reform News.

Colorado Appeals Court Upholds Nation’s First District-Run Voucher

Continued from page 1

County School District’s voucher program does not violate constitutional prohibitions against government establishing religion.

The voucher program is “neutral toward private religious schools because it is open to all private schools,” wrote Judge Jerry Jones in the majority opinion. “No student is compelled to participate in the [voucher program] or, having been accepted to participate, to attend any particular participating private school. To the extent students would attend religious services, they would do so as a result of parents’ voluntary choices.”

In 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court used similar reasoning in upholding Ohio vouchers challenged on the same grounds. The Colorado court also ruled private citizens can’t sue to overrule how school boards use state funds.

‘A Range of Choices’

Just south of Denver, Douglas County is the third-largest school district in Colorado, its wealthiest, and its academically highest-performing. Its school board will wait for the state supreme court’s decision before reopening the program, said board president John Carson.

Before a coalition of local taxpayers, the American Civil Liberties Union, and other organizations sued the district, about 500 kids were approved to attend private schools for fall 2011.

“We’re not doing this because we need to demonstrate substantial improvement, but because we believe it will make us even better and the kids in Douglas County will benefit,” Carson told School Reform News.

He noted 10 percent of the district’s students are enrolled in charter schools, a homeschooling partnership, and a bevy of online education options: “This isn’t about one particular program; it’s about offering parents the entire range of choices in publicly funded education, and we don’t see why that should be controversial.”

Opponents argue school districts should educate children only in conventional public schools.

“The public wants the district to turn its attention to educating the majority, and not waste time and money on a program that will serve only a very few,” said Cindy Barnard in a statement. She is president of Taxpayers for Public Education, one of the groups suing to stop the program. School Reform News attempted to reach her and other TPE members, but none returned calls.

Every Child Is Different

Becky Barnes, mother of an autistic child who had been granted one of Douglas County’s vouchers, said while her other two children attend and love their neighborhood public schools, this son needs a small and focused classroom, which he couldn’t get in public school.

“This would have given us the opportunity for him to be in a normal school setting with kids his own age,” she said. While his voucher is in limbo, Barnes’ son is attending a Douglas County online school.

“When your kid comes home and you know they’re not fitting in and you want to give them another option, then you understand [the need for vouchers],” she said. “If your kid’s going to school, a normal child like my other children, you don’t.”

Local Politics

The school board made enemies by deciding not to renew its teachers union contract in 2012, instead opting to contract with teachers individually, said Ben DeGraw, a senior education policy analyst for the Independence Institute.

“The majority of folks that I have talked to on both sides of the building, and on both sides of the aisle, for that matter, are in support of ... a thorough review ...” Behning said.

Nearly a thousand Indians and businesses signed a letter to Gov. Mike Pence (R) asking him to support SB 193. He has so far not responded.

John Carson

SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENT
DOUGLAS COUNTY, COLORADO SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Alabama Governor Bentley Signs School Choice Measure

Continued from page 1
tax-deductible donations to K-12 scholarship funds.

Statehouse ‘Chaos’
On February 28 the Alabama Senate passed the “accountability act” 51–26 and the House passed it 22–11 after tripling the length of the bill in a conference committee, adding the education tax credits.

Bentley (R) announced he would sign the bill on March 5, but the Alabama Educators Association (AEA) filed the restraining order first. The state supreme court ultimately ruled no one can sue to stop a law that has not yet been signed.

The restraining order charged House Republicans did not follow open meeting laws. AEA did not respond to a request for comment.

The surprise school choice addition created “chaos” in the statehouse, said Bradley Byrne, chairman of Alabama Reform, a nonprofit conservative group.

“We have supported school choice in the past, but we were not involved in this. I think the legislative leadership moved very quietly this year,” Byrne stated.

Political Horse-Trading
Democrats in the state legislature said they plan to filibuster every bill in response.

“Young every legal means to free children trapped in failing schools is no crime,” said Vicki Alger, a senior fellow of the Independent Women’s Forum in Washington, DC. “For decades opponents have used every conceivable technicality to block parental choice programs and keep children in schools that don’t work for them. That’s the real crime.”

The bill prompted shouting and angry words between Republicans and Democrats and moved Republicans to offer State Superintendent Tommy Bice concessions on other education bills in order to repair their relationship, said state Rep. Ed Henry (R-Decatur). That included a bill to withdraw Alabama from the Common Core, which a legislative committee tabled.

Prior to the tax-credit component, the legislation primarily granted flexibility for high-performing principals and schools to enable more innovation. After legislators changed the bill, Bice dropped his support, saying in a statement he is concerned with the costs of implementing the tax credits.

What School Choice Means
The scholarship portion will allow eligible students to choose to attend a public or private school.

“It will not be a dramatic loss for public schools, since only designated failing schools’ students whose parents don’t qualify for an income tax credit are able to use the scholarship,” said Byrne.

Families of children eligible for the scholarships cannot earn more than 150 percent of the state’s median household income, or $62,100 for a family of four, and the children must be assigned to a failing public school.

Big ‘Return on Investment’
Individuals can deduct 100 percent of their donations to the scholarships and businesses can deduct 50 percent. Middle-income and poor families also can deduct what they pay out of pocket for private tuition.

“Parental-use tax credits ease the burden on families with a tax liability,” Alger said. “Additionally, tax deductions and tax-credit scholarship programs conserve limited public resources because children who’d otherwise be educated at full public expense can attend less-costly private schools. Official government reports from programs such as Florida’s show a $1.49 savings for every dollar it reduces state revenue—a 49 percent annual return on investment.”

The bill caps total deductions for scholarship contributions at $25 million but does not cap tax credits families of students in failing schools can claim. The cap means about 11,000 children can receive scholarships, according to the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

Evelyn B. Stacey (ebstacey@yahoo.com) is a graduate of the Pepperdine Graduate School of Public Policy. She writes from Lancaster, California.
By Ashley Bateman

Florida state Reps. Carlos Trujillo and Michael Bileca have introduced a Parent Trigger bill that would authorize parents to choose a reform option for their children’s chronically failing schools.

State Sen. Kelli Stargel (R-Lakeland) filed a companion Senate bill that would require schools to notify parents of online options if their child is assigned a poorly rated or poorly qualified teacher.

With a Parent Trigger law, “I would feel empowered knowing that I would be listened to,” Florida dad Samuel Davila said in Spanish through a translator. “No one knows my child like I do. I would be able to work together with the teachers.”

Davila said most parents he knows feel similarly about a Parent Trigger.

The measure “provides parents with the most proactive method of insti-
tuting change in chronically failing schools” by engaging and informing parents, Trujillo (R-Miami) said.

The Florida bills, similar to the nation’s seven state Parent Trigger laws, allow a simple majority of parents whose children attend a failing school to require reform by signing a petition.

Reform options include converting the school into a charter school, closing it, reassigning students to better-performing nearby schools, and contracting with an outside organization to run the school.

Last year, another Parent Trigger bill in Florida failed by a single vote when its sponsor voted against it over a disagreement on another bill.

Smooth Passage?

Political strife more than policy caused the bill to fail last year, Stargel said. She’s optimistic this year’s bill will pass.

“The composition of the senate this year is actually more favorable to the proposal than it was a year ago,” said William Mattox, a resident fellow at the James Madison Institute.

Floridians are accustomed to stringent school accountability so would tend to support the bill, Mattox said.

Trujillo said the bill gives “parents ... an additional avenue to become involved in the decision-making process of their children’s education,” and that’s why his colleagues will pass it.

Generating Parent Engagement

In 2012, 25 Florida schools earned a failing grade for academic performance, which Trujillo said is “unacceptable.”

Parents whose children attend failing schools are often less engaged because they have little power in school decisions, Stargel said. Even if only 40 percent of parents sign a petition to take part in a Parent Trigger process, those parents have become more engaged in their child’s school and generate social capital, Stargel said.

“A lot of parents in [failing] schools don’t understand that they have a voice,” Stargel said.

Teacher Performance Info

Florida law requires schools to notify parents when assigning a student to a teacher teaching out of his or her field or who has received “needs improvement” or “unsatisfactory” evaluations for three years. Stargel’s bill would require schools to tell these parents about opportunities for better instruction through online schools.

Students taught by high-performing teachers learn five to six months more material each year than those taught by low-performing teachers, Hassell said.

The bill also requires that every child attending public schools be assigned to a teacher rated “effective” or “highly effective” at least every other year.

“Improving teacher quality and informing parents that they do not have to sit idly by while their children are taught by teachers with low performance ratings will result in positive outcomes by replacing these teachers with better-performing ones,” Trujillo said.

Parents of kids trapped in failing schools deserve to know that their voices are just as important and just as meaningful as the voices of the parents in the PTA,” she said.

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Carlos Trujillo
Representative - FL

Michael Bileca
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Keli Stargel
Senator - FL

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

Florida lawmakers are considering two major school choice proposals: a "charter course" option to let K-12 and college students use tax money for individual classes outside public schools, and education savings accounts, where families control their child’s share of education funding.

Neither concept is new. Louisiana’s course choice first became available in 2012, and Arizona’s first-in-the-nation education savings accounts opened in 2011.

The charter course proposal, modeled on Louisiana’s course choice program, would allow education providers to create “charter courses,” enabling school choice down to the credit level. Introduced by state Sen. Jeff Brandes (R-St. Petersburg), the bill would create à la carte education options, allowing students to exercise not only school choice, but course-level choice as well.

A 2012 presentation by Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen in Utah inspired Brandes’ proposal, he said. Christensen had discussed individual course accreditation as a means for creating modular curricula and ultimately customized learning options for students.

“We’re really seeing this as choice within choice,” Brandes said. “You can imagine someone going to a charter school and taking an accounting course through a university. And another through a school district in California, or finding the Khan Academy physics course. I see this as a whole new world of education options for students.”

The proposal would create a statewide contract or enable individual school districts to allocate funds to accredited courses. It would use a pay-for-performance model to fund courses based on the number of students taking and successfully completing them, with payments tied to outcomes instead of seat time.

Granular School Choice

A second school choice proposal, introduced by Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Joe Negron (R-Palm Beach), would create education savings accounts (ESAs) that work somewhat like health savings accounts, where parents control the funds and can divide them among education options such as textbooks, tutoring, and classes. A companion measure was introduced in the House by Education Committee Chairman Michael Bileca (R-Miami).

“Parents are the first and primary educators of their children. [Education savings accounts] empower parents to make the educational decisions they believe are best for their students.”

JOE NEGRON, CHAIRMAN
SENATE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
Palm Beach, Florida

Jeff Brandes
Senator - FL

By Tom Steward

A surprising new education study provides some clues to why K-12 public school funding has tripled in inflation-adjusted dollars since the 1950s.

The report flags 21 states as “top-heavy” because their public schools employ more non-teaching staff than teachers.

While the U.S. K-12 student population has doubled since 1950, the number of school employees has nearly quadrupled, notes “The School Staffing Surge: Decades of Employment Growth in America’s Public Schools, Part II.”

Classroom teachers in Virginia, the most administration-heavy state, could earn $29,000 more every year if public schools had hired non-teaching staff at the same rate as student population growth. Minnesota teachers could earn $15,000 more each year.

“We have increased employment in public schools at a much greater rate than the increase in students, and the most disconcerting part of that trend is that we’ve hired more administrators and other staff than teachers,” said Benjamin Scafidi, author of the report for the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

U.S. public schools have put 606,000 more “non-teaching personnel” on the payroll than the number needed to keep pace with the growth in students in 1992–2009, according to the analysis of data schools report to the U.S. Department of Education.

“That’s a startling fact, and I think it would surprise most people, but it wouldn’t surprise public school teachers. They’ll tell you this has been going on for a long time,” said Scafidi.

The “extra” non-classroom employees cost taxpayers approximately $24 billion per year, according to calculations in the report.

“States could do much more constructive things with those kind of dollars,” said Robert Enlow, the foundation’s president. “State leaders could be permitting salary increases for great teachers, offering children in failing schools the option of attending a private school, or directing savings toward other worthy purposes. Instead, states have allowed these enormous bureaucracies to grow.”

Texas was rated as the state with the most “extra” public school employees, with 160,000 non-teaching personnel above the corresponding increase in students, at an annual cost of more than $6 billion.

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21 States Employ More School Staff than Teachers

INTERNET INFO

“The School Staffing Surge,” Benjamin Scafidi, Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, February 2013: www.edchoice.org/StaffSurge2
KANSAS CONSIDERS BILL TO REQUIRE OBJECTIVE SCIENCE EDUCATION

By Ashley Bateman

If passed, a Kansas bill would have teachers provide students an objective view of climate change and other scientific controversies, covering the evidence for both sides of the scientific debates.

Introduced by the House Education Committee, House Bill 2906 says teachers will “provide information to students of scientific evidence which both supports and counters a scientific theory or hypothesis” and encourages the “teaching of such scientific controversies to be made in an objective manner.” It cites climate science as a specific example, but it does not limit scientific controversies to that subject.

“It is important that all students come out of the high school experience with the ability to understand scientific processes,” said state Rep. Ron Highland (R-Wamego), a member of the House Education Committee. “Everyone should be able to recognize the difference between a theory and fact. This requires critical thinking that will serve everyone well into whatever career they choose.”

Although media outlets construed the bill as “climate change denial,” it requires only an objective view of the topic, said Willie Soon, a prominent astrophysicist and expert on climate science.

“I don’t know how anybody could contest this statement,” Soon said. “It’s asking us to be open-minded. There’s no absolute authority in science.”

Highland said many parents, teachers, and administrators have contacted him “concerned with the science education our young people are receiving today.” That helped prompt the bill.

Controversial Topic, Not Bill

Government involvement has distracted attention from the science of climate change, said Chip Knappenberger, a climatologist and director of the Cato Institute’s science center.

“Climate change is controversial, probably more so because of the policy implications from it than perhaps even the science itself,” Knappenberger said. “Once government starts to get involved, then it can start steering the outcome of things, especially when money is being given out. … I don’t see anything that controversial in the bill. I’d be more concerned if it said the subjective study of science.”

Encouraging critical thinking in a science classroom by teaching both popular and alternative theories should already be normal, Soon said.

“Critical thinking is a whole lot more powerful than particular facts one needs to remember,” Soon said. “The primary problem is the great misunderstanding of science and the dominance of science being driven by popular media. There is all this political correctness which is really putting the whole situation in the wrong way.”

While climate science was the main reason legislators introduced the bill, the principles of critical thinking can and should be applied to all science problems, Highland notes.

“Because several people say something is true does not make it true,” he pointed out. “Remember, the world was once ‘flat.’ Fact must be backed with scientific evidence and then repeated by another scientist. … We would like for all students to ask, ‘Where is the scientific evidence for and against?’ and then for each to make up their own mind.”

Separating Science and Religion

On January 31, Kansas’s Joint Committee on Energy and Environmental Policy heard testimony about climate change, not on a specific bill but to inform the lawmakers. Witnesses, including Soon, described less popular but scientifically researched theories.

The legislative review coincides with the state board of education rethinking Kansas science standards, making it timely legislation. Tennessee and Louisiana recently passed similar legislation requiring objective study of scientific controversies, including human cloning and origins.

The Discovery Institute, an organization of scholars studying science and economics, offers a model bill for objective teaching and academic freedom in science. Emphasizing the separation of religion and science in the classroom is a key aspect of successful legislation, said Josh Youngkin, a Discovery Institute legal analyst.

“Bills like this are criticized as opening the door to religious instruction in school or to ideological promotion, anything but science or science education or critical thinking, which is contrary to both the intent behind the bills that I’m involved with and also the plain language of the bill,” he said. “There’s just no reasonable way that it could amount to a signal to people to introduce [religious] subject matter.”

‘Avoid Religious Language’

The Louisiana and Tennessee laws declare they do not advocate or protect religious education, Youngkin noted, and “there have been no negative repercussions” in either state, he said.

He did recommend amending the Kansas bill to include more than climate change as an example of scientific controversies to present evidence both for and against, such as Darwinian evolution and cloning.

“It is not only legally prudent, but wise to avoid religious language in science class,” Youngkin said.

The Kansas legislature will not likely take action on the bill until next year after more thought and discussion, Highland said.

Climate an ‘Evolving Science’

Popular conceptions of climate change as “a greenhouse effect caused by CO2 alone is just a wrong picture” of the science, Soon said.

“Climate change is an evolving field of research, and so some things we may have known five years ago are changing over time,” Knappenberger said. “It’s an evolving science, not like the science of gravity.”

Soon says the best evidence shows recent global warming falls within the historic range of natural climate variability, but this is ignored in public school classrooms while government funding continues to support human-caused global warming theories.

“In a classroom, you should throw away your personal viewpoint,” Soon said.

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@gmail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
By Rachel Sheffield

A bipartisan pair of state representatives proposes replacing North Carolina's existing tuition tax credits for special-needs children with a voucher plan that would pay for private school tuition.

State Reps. Marcus Brandon (D-Guilford) and Bert Jones (R-Rockingham) are primary sponsors of House Bill 269, which has several other Republican and Democrat cosponsors. It would convert the state’s tax reimbursement plan into a direct voucher for special-needs students worth up to $6,000 per school year. This would allow participation in the program by poor families who do not pay much or anything in taxes.

“The idea of converting the existing tax credit into a voucher may appear trivial. But it will be anything but trivial for thousands of families who [under the bill would] be able to receive funding for their special-needs child,” said Terry Stoops, director of education studies at the John Locke Foundation.

Brandon says he hopes the school choice plan will help low- and middle-income families.

“For me to look a constituent in the face and tell them that they have to go to this school because they live in this place is fundamentally wrong,” Brandon told School Reform News.

The Last Word
Currently, public schools get the final say in what services a special-needs child will get, after months of meetings between the child’s family and school officials. State and federal laws require schools to provide all children an “appropriate” and “quality” education, Brandon noted.

“Who gets to define ‘appropriate,’ and who gets to define ‘quality’?” he asked. “That has to be a family discussion. They have the right to choose that.”

Jones points to benefits both for children and their communities. Special-education services are often expensive, and schools determining them are often prohibited from considering the cost of a certain intervention or service.

The bill “is a win-win-win situation,” Jones said. “It allows more parents to best determine the best venue for their child with special needs, it saves the state money, and it frees up more money per pupil for the public schools.”

Bert Jones, State Representative Rockingham, North Carolina

Lack of Opportunity
People in the communities Brandon serves desperately need more education opportunities, he said.

“I was shocked when I went and knocked on doors,” he said. “It was hard for me to find someone who graduated from high school. You realize these people have zero percent chance of making it in society. They can’t get a job. It’s a cancer in the community.”

Brandon says it’s important to “fix public schools,” but “I can’t wait. Every year we lose kids. That’s why you see entire communities are decimated by this.”

Stoops expects more school choice proposals will surface. “Leaders in the General Assembly have made school choice a priority,” he said.

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

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Ala. Common Core Core Tests May Examine Kids’ Motivation, Behavior

By Joy Pullmann

As Alabama legislators tabled a bill to withdraw from Common Core national education standards, its department of education is adopting related tests and attempting to convince legislators and voters to keep the standards.

The day before the vote, state Superintendent Tommy Bice held a press conference to dispel “myths” about Common Core, a list of what K-12 children must know in English and math that 46 states have adopted.

People in other states “could be concerned” about the federal government using Common Core to amass student data and steer education, but Alabama has sidestepped these dangers, Bice said.

Although some states adopted Common Core before it was released or with little public input, Bice said he conducted four regional hearings on the standards before the state board of education adopted them. An audience member said the meetings were poorly attended and at regional service centers, not schools closer to families and teachers. Approximately 200 people attended the meetings altogether, according to Alabama board of education minutes.

“Common Core has never been piloted,” said Jane Robbins, a senior fellow for the American Principles Project. “How can anyone say it is good for kids when it’s not in place anywhere?”

Sharing Student Data

Alabama did not receive federal Race to the Top grants and was one of three states not to receive a federal grant to create massive connected student databases, Bice said. The U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) has recently changed federal privacy laws to allow information collected on classroom-reported standards to be shared with any companies, agencies, or people federal officials designate.

“Alabama has very strategically chosen not to be in one of the federally funded student testing consortia,” Bice said. Most states promised to replace their tests with ones currently under development by two Common Core “consortia,” or nongovernment nonprofits.

Alabama’s board of education is instead considering new, Common Core-aligned tests for grades 3–12 from ACT, called Aspire, said board of education member Charles Elliott.

Although Alabama has fewer federal entanglements through Common Core than other states, its No Child Left Behind waiver application ties it into the standards because adopting them is one of the federal waiver requirements, Robbins said. Bice says the state combined Common Core with its standards, but approximately 90 percent of Alabama’s standards are identical to Common Core, Robbins said. In addition, Aspire tests measure whether students have learned Common Core, not any add-ons.

Finding New Tests

Alabama’s previous tests were decent but required students to answer a very low number of questions correctly to pass, said Deputy State Superintendent Sherrill Parris.

“What we’re aiming for now is to be able to see a benchmark for students as early as end of third grade to determine whether they are on track to be college- and career-ready as measured by ACT at the end of 12th grade,” she said. That language is almost identical to what ACT Vice President Paul Weeks used to describe Aspire in a phone interview.

The goal is for high school graduates to need no remediation if they attend college, whereas current remediation rates are high, Parris said. Alabama now administers the ACT to all 11th graders, but the goal is to “back-map” those college expectations to the very start of school, she said.

Parris said Alabama officials want to buy tests from elsewhere rather than develop their own.

Beyond Testing Knowledge

ACT Aspire is part of the next generation of standardized tests quite different from what most adults think of, Weeks said. The system will test kids not just at the end of the year, but repeatedly throughout the year and on computers to give instant feedback about what students have and have not learned.

Questions are also no longer only multiple choice but will include open-ended prompts and even activities such as a virtual science experiment where students can “grab” flasks and “pour” liquids into a beaker, Weeks said.

Another component of ACT’s K-12 tests, called Engage, examines “academic behaviors.” These ask students to report whether they can manage their feelings, work well with others, and finish what they have started, for example. Teachers also rate students on these same qualities, such as “being willing to experience new things” and “listen to others’ points of view.” Engage is currently for grades 6–9, but ACT is working to apply it to younger grades, too, Weeks said.

“It’s not psychological or personality testing,” Weeks cautioned, but checking habits that promote academic success. The idea is to warn teachers and parents so they can “intervene” before kids are “at risk,” he said.

“A lot of parents do this as a matter of course,” Weeks said. “You observe your teen is spending a lot of time in front of the TV and their grades are suffering. But lots of people don’t operate that way, and we can’t assume that all students are getting that same level of support.”

While the Alabama department of education moves full speed ahead on Common Core despite a persistent board of education minority against it, including Gov. Bob Bentley (R), lawmakers said they believe these institutions will step back from the standards so the legislature doesn’t have to.

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is a research fellow of The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
S. Dakota Law Lets Schools Appoint Armed ‘Sentinels’

By Ashley Bateman

Starting July 1, South Dakota schools can appoint a trained person to carry a gun on campus under a first-of-its-kind “sentinel bill” signed by Gov. Dennis Daugaard on March 8.

General concern over the bill when first proposed gave way to widespread acceptance in the legislature after several key elements were added during the drafting process, said Ron Williamson, president of the Great Plains Public Policy Institute. The measure had strong support in rural counties and from law enforcement because it requires police to train every person appointed as a sentinel, he said.

“The large cities don’t want it; they don’t need it with law enforcement [close by],” said bill sponsor state Rep. Scott Craig (R-Rapid City). “The school districts that are 20 to 45 minutes away from the nearest sheriff, those folks feel vulnerable.”

Craig began working on the bill two weeks before a school shooting in Connecticut catalyzed similar bills across the country. At least five other states are considering similar legislation, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Forty-two states prohibit gun-carrying in schools by anyone but police. At least four other school shootings have occurred since the Connecticut tragedy.

Educator Support

Mike Calhoon, president of the Winner School District school board, is one of several school administrators supporting the bill.

“The large cities don’t want it; they don’t need it with law enforcement [close by]. The school districts that are 20 to 45 minutes away from the nearest sheriff, those folks feel vulnerable.”

SCOTT CRAIG, STATE REPRESENTATIVE RAPID CITY, SOUTH DAKOTA

“Many small towns have no city police force at all, but instead rely upon the county sheriffs and their deputies,” Calhoon said. “Some of these schools have a response time of as much as 45 minutes. So many things could happen in a defenseless school building in that amount of time. Having an appointed sentinel bearing a firearm would at least give those remote schools a chance to defend themselves.”

Winners School District probably won’t appoint a sentinel soon, thanks to nearby law enforcement and security measures already in place, Calhoon said. “I do want to have the option available if I feel the need [for a sentinel] at a later date,” Calhoon said. “As with any decision in any school district in South Dakota, that decision would be made by the local school board, with input from our administrators, staff, and patrons.”

Crafting the Bill

Craig’s interest in the bill came from knowing public schools throughout the nation are potential targets for violence, he said. Police directed Craig toward a local-control amendment that would place the decision of having armed personnel on campus within the hands of school districts and communities.

“The bill then began to take the shape to allow school districts to define who they want to be armed if they want somebody to be armed,” Craig said. “It’s completely permissive legislation—take it or leave it.”

Any school employee or volunteer may be appointed sentinel.

Support and Pushback

The South Dakota Education Association, Association of School Boards of South Dakota (ASBSD), and Superintendents’ Association of South Dakota lobbied against the bill. Each said during testimony on the bill that they spoke for the state’s school districts and teachers, Craig noted.

But that wasn’t entirely true. A member of Winner School District’s board is also on the ASBSD board, Calhoon said, and he voted to support the bill.

“I received many e-mails in which board presidents from around the state voiced their support of the sentinel bill,” he said. “Our superintendent supports the bill.”

Most of South Dakota is rural. In response to groups lobbying against the bill, Craig polled teachers and superintendents. He found a growing number favored it.

Accidental Injury Worries

Opponents’ main criticism has been that more guns on campus could increase accidental injuries. “Permit holders tend to be extremely law-abiding,” said John Lott Jr., an internationally known economist and gun violence researcher. “Firearms-related violations are at hundreds of thousandths of one percentage point [of permit holders].”

Before the federal government established more gun-free zones, many states allowed concealed weapons on campus without ill effects, he said.

“I expect some really contentious debate about the implementation of this wherever it is tried,” Calhoon said. “But that is the beauty of the bill. It is designed to give each district local control to decide … if it is something they need to do.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
Ohio May Expand Its School Voucher Program

By Mary Petrides Tillotson

Ohio Gov. John Kasich placed two expansions of the state’s EdChoice voucher program in his $15.1 billion budget proposal for 2014–15, which would increase state funding to schools over the next two years.

“If a school consistently fails to provide their students with the basic reading skills they need to succeed, we want to make sure that parents have alternatives,” said Jim Lynch, an advisor in Ohio’s Office of Budget and Management, in an email.

Students in kindergarten through third grade would qualify for the first expansion if the school they attend receives a D or F grade in literacy on the state report card.

The second voucher expansion would be available to kindergarten students in 2013–14 and expand to first graders the year after, for families who earn less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level. That’s about $67,000 per year for a family of four.

The state would pay the vouchers instead of deducting funds from school districts, Lynch said. Kasich’s budget sets aside $8.5 million for its first year and $17 million for year two.

 Approximately 16,000 Ohio students currently receive vouchers. The existing EdChoice program applies only to schools rated D or F overall, not those failing the literacy component or to all families with lower incomes.

Broadening Opportunity

Determining voucher eligibility based on family income rather than school performance is more objective and eliminates data manipulation to raise school scores, which some Ohio districts have done, said Robert Alt, president of the Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions.

The expansion would let students continue receiving vouchers if their family moves to a different district.

Sometimes children need something different from what even well-performing schools can offer, said Holli Stevenson, whose two children received Ohio vouchers.

“Parents who don’t make enough money to cover tuition, they’re kind of stuck and the kid is set up for failure,” she said.

Cincinnati Success

In 2009, Stevenson’s family moved to inner-city Cincinnati and she enrolled her two children in public schools. Soon after, she withdrew them to homeschool for the remainder of the year. When Stevenson learned about EdChoice in a radio ad, she enrolled her children in a private school. Afterward, her son received a large scholarship to a premier high school in town.

“They reawakened the desire for [my son] to learn; it turned him around,” she said. “He’s talking about college now.”

Vouchers also stave off middle-income families’ flight to the suburbs, Stevenson said.

“If we didn’t have the option of EdChoice, we would have moved out of here. We would have left the community we loved,” she said. “It’s not just a school program. It’s a community program. [Families] are able to stay in the community they want to be in, and can pour dollars into the economic situation, and mentor their neighbors, and be part of the community that is trying to thrive and not die away.”

Mary Petrides Tillotson (mary.c.tillotson@gmail.com), a former Michigan reporter, now writes from Front Royal, Virginia.

S.D. Common Core Rollback Fails

By Rachel Sheffield


Bolin (R-Canton) sees the standards adopted by South Dakota’s board of education in 2010 as “an attack on the local authority of people to run their own schools.”

Common Core sets out what K-12 students must know in each grade in math and English. Forty-five states have adopted it, and national tests will roll out in 2014.

Two Attempts Failed

Bolin’s proposals aimed to accomplish two purposes. The first proposal, which died 8–7 in the House Education Committee, would have allowed private schools to opt out of the Common Core without losing their state accreditation.

“Why are private schools not exempted from this major educational measure that is controversial, expensive, and shows no signs that it will work?” asked Bolin. “Private schools should not have to follow these national standards to maintain their accreditation.”

The second bill would have required the state board of education to receive approval from the legislature before adopting any further Common Core standards. Although the proposal passed the House 36–32, the Senate Education Committee rejected it 6–1.

Establishment Opposition

Bolin says his proposals were “heavily opposed by the [state] department of education and the current administration.” That, and because the standards are already in place, is likely why Bolin’s proposals failed, said Ron Williamson, president of the Great Plains Policy Institute.

In 2010 the South Dakota Department of Education held a hearing on the standards, at which education administrators strongly supported them and only one citizen spoke against them, said Mary Stadick Smith, a department spokeswoman.

“The states are faced with a problem in that education is best determined at the local level,” Williamson said. “However, at the same time, the state and local education boards are faced with federal mandates to keep Common Core standards.”

For example, the Obama administration granted states No Child Left Behind waivers—allowing them to ignore the “adequate yearly progress” requirements—only if they adopted “standards that are common to a significant number of states,” a definition only Common Core fits. Such involvement by the federal government has caused much of the concern over the standards.

Rachel Sheffield (rachel.sheffield@heritage.org) is an education research assistant at The Heritage Foundation.
Ind. Supreme Court Rules Vouchers Constitutional

By Joy Pullmann

I n a 5–0 decision, the Indiana Supreme Court ruled the state’s voucher program is constitutional, deciding against complaints it represents state funding of religion and undermines a constitutionally required system of public schools.

“The voucher program expenditures do not directly benefit religious schools but rather directly benefit lower-income families with school-children by providing an opportunity for such children to attend non-public schools if desired,” the court’s opinion says.

Currently, the two-year-old program allows 9,324 children from low- and middle-income families to take part of their state education funding to approved private schools. This fall it will have no enrollment cap.

The March court decision likely marks the end of lawsuits against the program on such grounds as the U.S. Supreme Court ruled similarly on a different case in 2002.

Indiana’s legislature is considering expanding the vouchers to include siblings of voucher recipients, special-needs children, kids in foster care, and military children. It also would increase the cap on the individual voucher amount to $6,500 from its current $4,500.

Twenty-two states and Washington, DC offer some type of private school choice. Nationwide, 104,000 students attend private schools using vouchers.

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Nevada Governor Sandoval Backs Long-Shot Tax-Credit Scholarships

By Casey Cheney

N evada Gov. Brian Sandoval drew first blood in education reform this legislative session, promoting tax-credit scholarships in his State of the State address.

“In many ways, [Sandoval] has enacted liberal policies in the last two years,” said Victor Joecks of the Nevada Policy Research Institute (NPRI), citing tax hikes and Medicare expansion. “Now he’s kind of giving lip service to some really important ideas like tax-credit scholarships and collective bargaining reform.”

The question, Joecks said, is, “How serious is the governor about pushing this?”

The scholarships would give businesses a dollar-for-dollar tax credit up to $1,500 for contributions to a scholarship fund. Students at low-performing schools could receive the funds to attend the school of their choice.

Savings Potential

With Nevada recently becoming more charter-school friendly and a bill in the legislature for a $750,000 loan fund to help charter schools open their doors, tax-credit scholarships would provide students alternatives to the status quo.

The benefits of an education tax credit would not stop at broadening scholastic avenues. NPRI estimated in a study the measure would save Nevada taxpayers between $590 million and $1.3 billion in its first ten years even as students already attending private schools gradually became eligible for the funds over the first seven years.

State Sen. Barbara Cegavske (R-Clark County) said three different versions of the bill are circulating, including the governor’s, and they must be combined and reconciled before being introduced in the Assembly and Senate. The tax-savings estimates vary among the three versions.

“A lot of people don’t understand the constitutionality of [tax-credit scholarships], like whether they can be used for religious purposes. People are not well-versed on them. They aren’t even well-versed on what a charter school is.”

ELISSA WAHL
RESOURCE SPECIALIST
RISE EDUCATION RESOURCE CENTER

Preaching and Practicing

The Republican governor’s support for tax-credit legislation gives the measure more pull in the legislature, but the plan faces strong Democratic opposition. Democrats control both houses of the legislature—an 11–10 edge in the Senate and a 27–15 edge in the Assembly—giving them the ability to stop the tax-credit legislation.

Though it’s not a voucher plan because it uses no public funds, RISE Education Resource Center resource specialist Elissa Wahl says the scholarship proposal will meet similar opposition.

“A lot of people don’t understand the constitutionality of [tax-credit scholarships], like whether they can be used for religious purposes. People are not well-versed on them,” she said. “They aren’t even well-versed on what a charter school is.”

Even if the bill becomes law, Wahl said she doubts tax-credit scholarships will give parents many more options because opponents typically sue to stop them immediately. Wahl’s group hopes to support legislation removing a requirement that charter schools receive approval from the local school district to open.

Governor Key

Joecks said the tax-credit measure’s success hinges on Sandoval.

“Does he use his influence to secure the hearing to make the public case for it?” Joecks asked. “If he really wanted to push it, I feel optimistic he could get the bill through or really start a movement to get it passed in the next session.”

Sandoval spokesman Mary-Sarah Kinner said only that the governor will follow through with his speech and continue to fight for school choice.

Joecks says he suspects Sandoval will put forth a limited effort for the bill to avoid angering unions too much and to improve his reelection prospects.

A Leg Up on Vouchers

Although many people call tax-credit scholarships vouchers, they differ in a legally important way: Vouchers send tax dollars to private schools, whereas tax-credit scholarships only allow private individuals to send private dollars to private schools. Because the state is not involved, a Nevada tax credit “passes constitutional muster,” Joecks said.

In many states, students wanting to attend religious schools cannot receive voucher money. Education tax credits, on the other hand, do not come from the government, which frees the money from government interference.

“I would love to see vouchers come forward, but a lot of politically active friends say not to hold hopes too high,” Wahl said.

School Reform News repeatedly attempted to contact Nevada Superintendent for Public Instruction James Guthrie for comment. When Guthrie’s executive assistant eventually replied by email, she declined to comment.

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Legislation pending in Georgia would raise the state’s tax-credit scholarship cap from $50 million to $80 million. The program allows residents to receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for donations to nonprofits that give students scholarships to private schools.

Donations to scholarship funds “reach [the] cap way before the deadline every year, highlighting the desperate need among families to have more education alternatives and the willingness of taxpayers to commit money to school choice in Georgia,” said Benita Dodd, vice president of the Georgia Public Policy Foundation.

The tax-credit scholarships sent approximately 11,000 students to private schools in 2011–12. Today 35 nonprofit organizations grant scholarships. Georgia also offers special-needs vouchers.

“[I am] thrilled … taxing Americans can still practice their constitutional rights to associative and free use of their own funds for charitable purposes.”

EARL EHRHART
STATE REPRESENTATIVE
POWDER SPRINGS, GEORGIA

Inexpensive, Popular
House Bill 140 will “provide more choice and hope for children and parents in Georgia,” said bill sponsor state Rep. Earl Ehrhart (R-Powder Springs). The program has been “wildly successful in supporting children,” he said. The average scholarship is about $3,500, roughly 40 percent of Georgia’s per-pupil annual public school spending, according to the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

“The tax-credit scholarships provide an alternative to the one-size-fits-all model of public schools,” Dodd said, “giving families the opportunity to customize their child’s education by choosing a public school or private school that fits their needs.” She added, “The public school a child may leave isn’t necessarily a bad school. It may simply not accommodate that child’s particular needs.”

Questions About Transparency
Opponents charge the program sends tax money to religious schools. But the scholarships are “funded by donations from individuals and corporations, not taxpayer dollars,” said Danielle LeSure, research manager for the Center for an Educated Georgia. “Similar to individuals giving a tax-deductible donation to the charity or place of worship of their choice, tax-credit scholarship donors and scholarship recipients can select any eligible private school, religious or non-religious institution.”

Ehrhart says he is “thrilled … tax-paying Americans can still practice their constitutional rights to associative and free use of their own funds for charitable purposes.”

He has dismissed reports that some schools and scholarship organizations gave families tuition discounts for getting scholarship donors, that others were telling families to fake public school enrollment to be eligible for the program, and some told families their scholarship donations would be applied to their child’s tuition.

Dodd noted, “There are indeed bad players. The way to get them out of the arena is through transparency and accountability” rather than “by restrictions on children’s educational opportunities.”

She cautioned against throwing out the entire program rather than fixing its loopholes.

“School choice is never popular among establishment types, so several groups who believe that the government should corner the market on education are trying to poke holes in the scholarship program,” Dodd said. “The bottom line is that the money should follow the child and the child should come first—and that is accomplished by providing a variety of viable, accountable options in education, not by restricting them.”

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Mass. Schools Adopt New Transgender Policy

By Mary Petrides Tillotson

Massachusetts public schools may have to rearrange locker rooms, restrooms, and sports teams to comply with a new interpretation of laws prohibiting discrimination against transgender children.

According to the guidelines, schools must treat students as male or female on the basis of what the child says his or her sex is, regardless of the child’s physical or biological makeup or prior beliefs about his or her gender.

The guidelines, effective immediately, follow a November 2011 state law prohibiting transgender discrimination in housing, employment, and other areas where other forms of discrimination are already prohibited.

“Every child has the right to a safe, supportive environment within their school,” said Lauren Green, program coordinator for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Teachers, principals, and “people who had experience dealing with transgender children” helped write the guidelines, she said, which provide “overall guidance for what we do regularly.”

The state’s education department is “not really commenting on why this started or why it’s necessary,” Green said. “The guidelines are pretty clear.”

Young transgender children are rare. A Colorado six-year-old born a boy whose parents call a girl prompted their lawsuit this spring after school officials assigned the child a private bathroom.

‘Stunning’ Free-Speech Interference

The guidelines leave no room for disagreement or confusion over sexual identity shifts, using the example of a male student, John, who later considers himself a female and begins using the name Jane. In such a case, teachers must refer to the student with female pronouns and the new name, the guidelines say.

“If students do not act accordingly,” the guidelines say, “you may speak to them privately after class to request that they do. Continued, repeated, and intentional misuse of names and pronouns may erode the educational environment for Jane. It should not be tolerated and cannot be grounds for student discipline.”

The guidelines pose “a stunning interference with people’s freedom of speech and freedom of thought,” said Peter Sprigg, a senior fellow at the Family Research Council. “Essential-ly, it would be forcing people to affirm things that are contrary to their own personal religious convictions.”

Green declined to comment on these concerns.

Circumventing Parents

Students alone are responsible for determining their own gender identity, the guidelines say, which they and the school may, in some circumstances, hide from parents.

The guidelines note some students “are not openly [transgender] at home for reasons such as safety concerns or lack of acceptance.” In these situations, schools must consult with the student before using male or female pronouns in correspondence with parents.

“This interferes with parental authority in case of parents who may not want to affirm a gender transition for their child and who on the contrary may be seeking to help the child overcome their gender identity issues and become comfortable with their born sex,” Sprigg said.

The guidelines will likely cause confusion for children, Sprigg said, as they compel authority figures to tell children the opposite of what their own eyes and experience indicate.

He said traditional standards “based on apparent biological differences” are much easier for students to understand than standards based on allegedly “innate personality characteristics.”

Changing Rooms

Locker rooms and restrooms will likely cause the most concern, according to the guidelines.

“A girl who does not want to be exposed to male genitalia in the locker room and a parent who doesn’t want their daughter to be exposed has no recourse,” Sprigg said.

Teachers may question a student’s gender identity if they “have a credible basis for believing that the student’s gender-related identity is being asserted for some improper purpose,” the guidelines state.

Green said teachers will deal with these situations appropriately: “They are adults. I’m sure they can handle this.”

‘More Feelings of Discomfort’

The guidelines mention two types of discomfort—that of the transgender student now using the opposite changing facilities and that of the other students now seeing an opposite-sex student use their facilities, noted Emmett McGroarty, director of the Preserve Innocence Initiative for the American Principles Project.

The guidelines instruct schools to have transgender students use the facilities that correspond with their gender identity, or a unisex facility. They say other students’ discomfort should not be grounds for denying the transgender student access to a sex-separated facility.

But granting a transgender student access to opposite-sex bathrooms and locker rooms doesn’t relieve students’ uncomfortable feelings, McGroarty said: “I think if anything it creates more feelings of discomfort among the students who were there and the student who was granted access. It doesn’t strike me as any kind of solution.

“I certainly agree with the idea that we have to have a good, welcoming environment, a secure environment for children in schools,” McGroarty said.

“Part of that is, obviously, you have to teach children a sense of modesty and respect.”

Conflicting Values

Putting naked boys in girls’ bathrooms and locker rooms or vice versa degrades the respect adults want to teach children to have for themselves and others, he said.

“If you have a work of art, a work of treasure, you shelter it so it is protected, and I think the human body is the same thing, particularly among children. You want them to grow up [thinking], ‘I’m special and my body is sacred and it’s not to be carelessly regarded by anyone.’”

Mary Petrides Tillotson (mary.c.tillotson@gmail.com), a former Michigan reporter, now writes from Front Royal, Virginia.
Okla. Legislators Echo Students’ Privacy Concerns

By Joy Pullmann

Jenni White knows just why she doesn’t want schools amassing her children’s personal information into national databases accessible to anybody governments designate.

“I was a horrible child,” she said. “I didn’t mature until after 40. I can’t conceive of what my life would be like now if I had a record of what Jennifer did as a kid following me.”

That’s why the mother of five and cofounder of Restoring Oklahoma Public Education (ROPE) supports Oklahoma House Bill 1989. The student privacy bill passed the House unanimously and awaits a Senate hearing.

HB 1989 requires the state Board of Education to inventory what student-specific data the state collects, create a detailed data security plan, and send no student-specific information anywhere outside the state unless federal law requires or the student participates in multistate testing.

Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, New York, and Oregon also have recently proposed similar legislation.

Federal Intrusion

On March 27, ROPE and several legislators held a rally at the Oklahoma state capitol to discuss student privacy intrusions and their root in Common Core, a set of national education requirements and corresponding tests 46 states have adopted. Because Common Core tests are national, they are a prime vehicle for filling a national database of student information.

In 2012, the U.S. Department of Education rewrote federal privacy laws to let it share children’s academic records with virtually anyone. States have begun combining typical student records of test scores and discipline history with highly personal information such as medical records and psychological evaluations. Nine states are compiling such information, which includes addresses and Social Security numbers, into a giant private database called inBloom.

The stated goal of Common Core is to get students “college- and career-ready,” which Education Secretary Arne Duncan has said student data tracking can assist.

“Few people know the extent of the changes, driven by the private groups advocating this change, which will result in large profits for a few private companies,” said state Rep. Gus Blackwell (R-Oklahoma City).

Blackwell wrote HB 1907 to create a task force to study the cost of Common Core, which few states have estimated. After the bill passed its committee hearing unanimously, House Speaker T. W. Shannon (R-Lawton) refused to bring the bill for a floor vote, effectively ending consideration of it. Shannon’s office has not responded to requests for comment.

Oklahoma Gov. Mary Fallin (R) is vice chairman of the National Governors Association, a nonprofit that instigated Common Core. She took the position after New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie (R) turned it down, saying it would require too much of his time.

Privacy vs. Accountability

The tension is between protecting children’s privacy and collecting the information necessary to demonstrate each public school actually educates kids, said HB 1989 cosponsor state Rep. Jason Nelson (R-Oklahoma City).

The bill is intended to protect student privacy without being overly prescriptive with technologies that often change quickly, he said: “It can be a little tricky going in even with the scalpel and saying, ‘You can collect this for this purpose and not for that purpose.’ [Such a bill] would be a monstrosity that wouldn’t work. We want to know what data we have and why we have it to trigger public input to guide our actions over the next few years to ensure we’re being responsible for the data.”

The state spends some $5.6 billion to educate 660,000 K-12 schoolchildren, he noted.

“The state has to have data. ... But certain data, like a Social Security number, there is no reason to have that at all,” Nelson said. “The school district needs student-level data, but I don’t know the state does, and certainly the federal government does not.”

HB 1989 also would require the state board of education to report to the legislature annually on any new data it wants to collect and to get legislative approval for any such expansion.

Whereas adults have the maturity to decide whether and how they want their personal information such as location, Google searches, and grocery shopping habits tracked, “No child does,” White said. “So stop that.”

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is managing editor of School Reform News.
An advocacy group paid approximately $90,000 for TV and radio ads supporting national Common Core education standards in Indiana. Indiana’s legislature is currently considering suspending implementation of the Common Core over cost and transparency concerns while the state holds hearings on it and estimates the costs of retooling what K-12 kids learn in math and English.

Stand for Children (SFC) has deep progressive roots, spending money in 2012 to support President Barack Obama’s campaign and two Democrat candidates in Tennessee. It advocates higher education spending and more government programs for young children. In 2011, cofounder Jonah Edelman was caught on tape describing how the organization moved its priority bill through the Illinois legislature:

“We hired 11 lobbyists, including the four best insiders and seven of the best minority lobbyists, preventing the unions from hiring them. We enlisted a statewide public affairs firm,” he said. “We raised $3 million for our political action committee between the election and the end of the year. That’s more money than either of the unions have in their political action committees. And so essentially, what we did in a very short period of time was shift the balance of power.”

SFC does not report its donors to the Federal Elections Commission. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which paid for the Common Core to be created by private nonprofit organizations, has given SFC $9,017,948 for “global policy and advocacy” and Common Core activity.

Last year in Memphis, SFC spent $20,000 on another TV ad encouraging voters to approve a higher sales tax.

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

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FRIEDMAN FOUNDATION
FOR EDUCATIONAL CHOICE
As shifting employment opportunities and reform movements alter the U.S. education landscape, one organization has received steadily increasing support from lawmakers.

Teach for America (TFA) began as Wendy Kopp’s senior thesis in 1989. A Princeton University undergraduate, Kopp wanted to improve poverty-stricken urban schools by recruiting young, enthusiastic, and persistent college-educated adults into education. In 1990, 500 new college graduates joined the first TFA class as teachers who bypassed traditional teacher education.

Kopp started “a Peace Corps for urban education,” said Alan Borsuk, a senior fellow at Marquette University Law School. “There was a much bigger need then for a shot in the arm for urban teaching, a lot of jobs open, and it tapped into a realistic [desire] that college grads had that they wanted to do something to help.”

Now TFA is active in almost half the states, this year supporting more than 10,000 young teachers. Donations provide 70 percent of TFA’s income, with governments picking up the other 30 percent. TFA recruits heavily from Ivy League and top-rated public universities and was listed as one of Fortune’s top 100 companies to work for in 2013. Corps members commit to a two-year stint in needy public schools.

Study Says
Teach for America has been controversial, however, because its teachers get good results from students with only a summer of teacher training before their two-year placement.

Studies in Louisiana, North Carolina, and Tennessee have found students with TFA teachers learn as much as or more than those with traditional teachers.

This March, another study found students of TFA members learn more.

The Edvance Research study found Texas middle-school math students of TFA corps members received more than half a year more learning than students in the classrooms of other early-career teachers. Middle-school reading students of TFA alumni received more than half a year extra learning than students in other classrooms, and in middle-school math classrooms TFA alumni got almost an entire year of extra learning into their charges’ minds.

Attracting Lawmakers
In February, the Virginia legislature unanimously passed a bill changing teacher certification to allow TFA into the state.

The licensure changes will allow districts and principals to partner with TFA as an additional source of quality teachers, said Kaitlin Gastrock, a TFA spokeswoman.

The legislation would let TFA partner with “in need” districts, meaning those with a significant achievement gap between white and minority students.

“We’re eager to join efforts to expand educational opportunities for kids,” Gastrock said.

Teach for America does not currently operate in West Virginia, either, but the governor has proposed increasing alternative licensure options. Though the original bill was halted, Gastrock said the potential for expanding into the state is good because the legislature commissioned a study of alternative teacher certification.

Welcome to Milwaukee
Wisconsin’s largest city also has seen more TFA members since they began teaching in Milwaukee four years ago. Gov. Scott Walker (R) recently allocated $1 million over two years to support plans for doubling the number of TFA teachers in Milwaukee, currently at 50.

“This is the first time we’re being considered in the budget,” said Maurice Thomas, director of TFA Milwaukee. “I think it’s the results that we’re seeing in our schools and with our teachers.”

In Milwaukee, TFA teachers have staying power. After their two-year commitment, approximately 60 percent remain in the Milwaukee education community.

“Our teachers are being very creative and strategic in combating poverty in their classrooms, and they are seeing that it is soluble,” Thomas said. “They are becoming convinced about the city of Milwaukee.”

Job cuts four years ago meant many TFA alumni moved into private and charter schools.

“TFA is thought of very highly in [Milwaukee] private and charter schools,” Borsuk said. “Now Milwaukee public schools are having a hiring wave and asking for more TFA.”

Evolving Organization
What began primarily as a movement to address needy urban students has evolved. A growing number of TFA educators have been filling positions in charter and private schools in some states.

“Right now the geography of the issues has changed,” Borsuk said. “There isn’t a shortage of people who apply to be teachers in urban areas, and so the need is a little different. There are a lot of schools closing, so the market has changed some.”

The nationally known Rocketship charter school organization is opening its first school outside of California in Milwaukee, and it’s relying heavily on TFA partnerships to do so. Currently, about 50 percent of Rocketship staff are first- or second-year TFA members.

Rocketship aims to eliminate the achievement gap between high- and low-income children within the next generation, and it integrates uncommon amounts of technology with a highly competitive teaching staff to do so, said Kevin Bechtel, Rocketship’s national development manager.

“These individuals are really the ones who can transform communities,” he said. “TFA is attracting and recruiting some of the best leaders in the country. Perseverence is really important in the world of education reform.”

TFA recruits have “really high-quality raw talent,” he said.

Unlike most teacher preparation, TFA provides ongoing training for its teachers and it allows alumni to continue training with them past their two-year commitment.

“They’re trying to build a long-term cadre of education activists who will be healthy contributors to the education scene,” Borsuk said.

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
Review by Neal McCluskey

Government-mandated school segregation was an evil that had to be eradicated, an affront to the basic American values of equality under the law and individual liberty. But what if what replaced it—even if well-intentioned—continued to condemn many African-Americans to inferior schools based simply on their race? Would that outcome be any more just?

Those questions underlie Divided We Fail, a book about black families who took on the integration system of Jefferson County, Kentucky, which—along with Seattle, Washington’s—the U.S. Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional in 2007. The system required that no school have less than 15 percent African-American students, and no more than 50 percent.

As author Sarah Garland illustrates, the end result of Jefferson County’s system was to freeze some black kids out of the most desirable schools because they would have put the institutions past their black-enrollment limits. The threshold also ensured African-Americans would never have majority control over any school.

Garland notes the activists who took on the system didn’t typically oppose integration, but “they wanted equal outcomes for black children and they also wanted equal power over the schools and over the content and trajectory of their children’s education.”

Dismissing Choice

Garland, a white Louisville native and one-time bused student, makes it clear she, too, supports integration, but she came to sympathize with the activists when she learned of their grievances. This book is from an integration choir member, not an opponent.

Unfortunately, Garland’s choir status is all too clear when she attacks school choice, which attaches funding to children instead of schools and, in so doing, gives greater power to individual families. When parents can decide where to direct their children and education dollars, they have far more influence than when children are assigned to schools based on whatever a state, judge, or school board deems best.

Of course those are contested points, but rather than seriously grapple with them Garland dismisses choice with the shallowest of claims, asserting, “fundamental to a market-based system of choice-based education was Darwinian competition that created winners and losers; desegregation was meant to equalize all schools, lift all boats.”

Need Creates Options

Au contraire! While free markets certainly result in producer competition, the end result is not usually winners and losers among customers. Does Blackberry fading away make smartphone users losers? No. They’ve already won, with Androids and iPhones serving them much better.

Such lifting of all consumer boats isn’t the only choice benefit Garland brushes aside. Were markets allowed to work, the heavily demanded, law-themed magnet program that Dionne Hopson, a main subject of Garland’s book, was blocked from entering would likely have been replicated, as providers saw excess demand and a chance to profit. There’s a reason there are lots of Starbucks drinkers and Starbucks stores: In free markets, supply rises to meet demand.

A real market also would likely enable African-Americans who so desired to go to a majority black school, without compelling anyone else to attend such an institution. Black students interested in such schools could freely choose them if educators freely chose to offer them.

Finally, Garland is too quick to credit compelled integration for academic improvements. African-American scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress certainly have improved since the early 1970s, but that doesn’t tell us whether forced school integration did it.

Just as likely is that the demise of Jim Crow and evolving social attitudes have fueled all sorts of improvements. In fact, appreciable research suggests black students in coercively integrated schools did not see marked improvements as a result.

Garland’s book is a welcome illustration of why many African-Americans may dislike forced integration. But it doesn’t give a fair chance to the system arguably best suited to empower black families: school choice.

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