Indianapolis Is First State to Drop Common Core Standards

By Joy Pullmann

I
ndiana Gov. Mike Pence signed a bill in March officially rejecting Common Core national standards, making it the first state to do so.

But the parents and curriculum experts whose criticism led to the change also criticize the first draft of replacement standards for looking very similar to the Common Core mandates it is meant to replace.

The draft, released to the public in February, essentially overlays Common Core with so many more mandates from other standards that roughly 90 percent of Common Core constitutes half the draft, according to an analysis of the math standards by former U.S. Department of Education official Ze’ev Wurman. During three public hearings around the state on February 24–26, school administrators and teachers complained the 98-page draft with more than 1,000 K–12 mandates would be virtually impossible to cover during the school year.

At the end of the February 26 hearing in Plymouth, a second-grade teacher stood up. “I sat here for hours and didn’t think I would speak, but I have to,” she said. She feared publicly speaking her mind, she
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Many people helped us get to where we are today. We thank you all.

And we look forward to our next 30 years of fighting for your freedom.
Arizona School Choice Idea Spreads

By Loren Heal

Crystal Fox of Tempe, Arizona tried to keep her two special-needs children in public schools. Fox believes in public education and giving kids experiences similar to those of other people they’ll meet as adults, she said. But it just wasn’t working for her kids. Her daughter Tia, 11, has severe autism, and her son, Austin, 18, has Asperger’s Syndrome.

Austin wanted to be homeschooled. “I remember [when he was] in eighth grade, thinking, ‘This is the first year he didn’t cry going to school,’” Fox said. “He hated it. He was bullied.”

Austin eventually left public school after 10th grade. Arizona offers education savings accounts (ESAs) to special-needs children like Austin. ESAs allowed him and his mother to find a private school where kids didn’t pick on him.

“Austin was ready to drop out. He couldn’t do it anymore,” Fox said.

Arizona subsequently expanded its ESAs to low-income kids, foster kids, and military kids. This session, Iowa, Kansas, Mississippi, and Missouri considered bills to create ESAs for special-needs children. If the programs are successful, they probably will be expanded to cover more students.

ESA Proposals Bloom

The Missouri proposal would send 90 percent of state education funds for a special-needs child directly to a savings account controlled by his or her parents. The family could use the money for a variety of education expenses, including therapy, tutoring, textbooks, and classes. The specific amount of state funds spent on disabled children varies according to the child’s disabilities.

The Mississippi legislature, meanwhile, ultimately rejected the Equal Opportunity for All Students with Special Needs Act. The bill would have established education savings accounts for parents of students with special needs. The pilot program would have been limited to 500 children, who could receive $6,000 each.

At the federal level, U.S. Rep. Matt Salmon (R-AZ) has submitted The School Choice Education Savings Account Act, which would expand federal college-focused Coverdell education savings accounts to encompass K–12 tuition and expenses.

“Parents should be the key decision-makers on their children’s education,” said Salmon.

Voucher vs. ESA

Research has shown many Arizona parents like Fox use ESAs for multiple education expenses, said Jonathan Butcher, education director at the Goldwater Institute and author of some of that research.

“A voucher is a coupon that goes from the state to the school, or from the state to a parent who then signs it over to a school,” said Butcher. “With an ESA, a parent gets an account number and a restricted-use debit card, and can make educational purchases based on the uses given to that card.”

James Shuls, an education analyst at the Show-Me Institute, hopes the Missouri program will pass and expand over time. “It is an excellent way to put power back into the hands of the parent. It expands opportunity, while also saving the state and local school district money,” he said. “If the idea is good, and I believe it is, there is no reason we should limit this opportunity to only special-needs students.”

Customizing Education

People who support personalizing education, such as teachers, should support ESAs, Shuls said: “I know of no better way to allow for the customization of education so that we can meet the needs of the individual student.”

ESA in hand, the Fox family looked at charter schools, performing-arts schools, prep academies, and Christian schools, although Fox is an atheist.

“If they can provide an education, really who cares if they’re Christian, Jewish, Muslim, ‘Nothing,’ performing arts?” Fox said. “So we didn’t discriminate.”

Austin now attends a Christian school, and in fall 2013 he earned a 4.0 GPA. He also scored well enough on the SAT and ACT to get college scholarships.

“To go from being ready to drop out in 10th grade, and to be able to turn it around this much, has been a shock,” Fox said.

Tia is not eligible for the ESA program because she couldn’t make it through public kindergarten. One year of public school enrollment is mandatory for ESA eligibility. So her mom spends around $10,000 a year for Tia’s education.

“She pretty much wiped out all of our money,” Fox said, chuckling.

Loren Heal (loren.heal@gmail.com) is a research programmer at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a reporter for The Heartland Institute.
Arizona Supreme Court Allows ‘Vouchers 2.0’

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water Institute, which had intervened in the lawsuit. “The language in there really confirmed everything that we said about education savings accounts from the beginning. We’ve made the case that they are distinct from vouchers and the provision in the law makes them unique, and parents are not compelled to spend their money on any one thing.”

Families, Not Schools, Benefit

When the state supreme court struck down the voucher program in 2009, it based its decision on the state’s Blaine Amendment, which prohibits public funds from aiding private schools, regardless of whether they’re faith-based. Families using vouchers would have been required to spend voucher money on private schools.

Families using ESAs receive a limited-use debit card and permission to spend that money on private school tuition, textbooks, tutoring, education therapy, and other educational expenses. The money rolls over year to year and eventually can help pay for college.

When the appeals court upheld the ESA program, it noted parents don’t have to spend the money on private school tuition, so the program doesn’t violate the state’s constitution.

“The specified object of the ESA is the beneficiary families, not private or sectarian schools,” its opinion stated. “Depending on how the parents choose to educate their children, this may or may not include paying tuition at a private school.”

Butcher said he hopes other states will take the court’s decision as a cue to enact ESAs.

“The life cycle of school choice programs is almost predictable,” he said. “It gets passed into law, the union sues, the court decides, and if they decide favorably, other states start doing it.”

Expansion Under Consideration

About 700 students are currently using Arizona’s ESA program, and state lawmakers are considering several bills that would expand the program to allow more students to participate. Currently, students with special needs, military families are eligible.

Several states have considered enacting ESA programs, but so far none has done so.

“The ESA program is changing lives, and this decision … gives parents the peace of mind to know this program is going to be there in the future to help their kids,” said Tim Keller, an attorney for the Institute for Justice, which intervened in the lawsuit on behalf of Arizona families.

Colorado Teachers Want More Freedom

A survey shows members of Colorado’s largest nonunion teachers association support pension reform and less government regulation.

“The people making decisions for students should be the professionals closest to the students,” said Monika Troutman, a teacher in Jefferson County Public Schools. “It is imperative that teachers be given more flexibility.”

More than 300 Colorado teachers responded to the annual survey from the Professional Association for Colorado Educators. Eighty-nine percent supported letting teachers have 401(k)-style retirement accounts rather than the typical government pension plan.

“It is sad that in a career already hindered by limited pathways for advancement, good teachers can be essentially punished both financially and professionally if they choose to move to another school district or have to move for a personal reason,” said teacher Sarah Lindholm.

Seventy-seven percent supported a plan to deposit some of each student’s state funding into an account teachers control and can use for classroom supplies. Eighty-one percent supported allowing teachers to get a waiver from state or federal mandates, such as student seat time and curriculum prescriptions.

— Staff reports

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Judge Blocks North Carolina’s Voucher Program

By Mary C. Tillotson

Some 4,000 North Carolina families must wait for the courts to untangle a legal challenge involving the state’s voucher program before they’ll know what schools their children can attend next year.

“We will not yield until every parent and child from a poor or working-class background has the same educational opportunities that many of their wealthier peers have.”

Wake County Superior Court Judge Robert Hobgood put a temporary stop to the voucher program February 21 after refusing to dismiss the lawsuit brought by the North Carolina Association of Educators and 25 other plaintiffs.

The lawsuit alleges the voucher program shortchanges public schools, diverting funds from public schools to private schools.

The program is perfectly legal, said Richard Komer, senior attorney for the Institute for Justice, which is intervening in the lawsuit on behalf of affected families.

The state’s constitution designates certain money for public education, and that money must be spent on public education, Komer said. But that doesn’t prohibit the state from also funding school vouchers.

The program allows 2,400 students to receive scholarships of $4,200 each. Tens of thousands of students are eligible for the program, and about 4,000 applied, said Terry Stoops, director of research for the John Locke Foundation.

North Carolina public schools spend on average $8,195 per student, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

The Center for Education Reform called the judge’s decision “appalling.”

By Loren Heal

A bill to expand one of the nation’s largest school choice programs is under consideration in the Florida House after passing a committee March 6.

If the measure becomes law, thousands more disadvantaged students will be able to receive tax-credit scholarships and donors could use their donations to reduce the sales tax they owe.

“Parents should have the right to choose the best school meeting the needs of their child,” said Matthew Ladner, a researcher for the Florida-based Foundation for Excellence in Education, “whether that school is public or private. Florida lawmakers have successfully used the expansion of parental choice as one of the strategies for improving the public education system, but the scholarship program serving low-income children has tens of thousands of children on the waiting list.”

The program gives donors a tax credit for giving to nonprofit organizations that offer K-12 scholarships to private schools. The choice program served 60,000 students in 2013-14; the new proposal would gradually expand it to 120,000, House Speaker Will Weatherford’s (R-Wesley Chapel) office said.

Approximately 34,000 families were unable to get a scholarship this year because funds ran out.

The Senate version of the bill would require every scholarship student to take state tests instead of any nationally norm-referenced test, the current requirement.

Removing Barriers to Access

Families of children in the program must meet income requirements and live in poor-performing school districts. The bill would expand income eligibility to 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

Legislative proponents say they want to keep the program from becoming a barrier for parents who want to improve their finances. Once a child meets eligibility requirements, proponents say, they should not be kicked off the program and have to change schools just because their family income goes up, through marriage or employment changes, for example.

Saving Money

Some critics complain the program directs money away from public schools, but “in Florida’s case [scholarship students] are helping to relieve public school overcrowding,” said Ladner, “The Census Bureau projects over a million-person increase in the school age population between 2010 and 2030, and currently there is nowhere to put that many students. Far from ‘draining money,’ the Florida Step Up for Students program gives parents options and helps keep more public school funding in the classroom.”

For the 2013-14 school year the scholarships averaged $4,880, which covers about two-thirds of the average participating school’s tuition and fees, and “there are several schools where that covers everything,” said Patrick Gibbons, spokesman for Step Up For Students, a nonprofit organization that manages the program.

Since the scholarships are much less than the average $8,700 the state spends to educate kids in public schools, in 2012-13 the program saved the state $58 million.

The bill would plug the program into the state’s largest source of revenue, its sales tax. It currently lets businesses deduct only from their corporate tax liability. Since every business is different, choosing which tax to use can help businesses continue to give, Gibbons said.

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Indiana Becomes First State to Drop Common Core

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said. Common Core went into place in her classroom in 2013–14, she said, and it’s so overwhelming she can’t “truly care” about her students and their families. “We just run all day long,” she said, her voice trembling. “I feel Common Core is really beating up our children.”

After criticism from even Common Core supporters, several panels convened by Pence’s office are once more rewriting the standards draft. The new law requires new standards and tests to be in place by July 1.

High-Energy Politics

In 2013, Indiana lawmakers put Common Core’s national curriculum and testing mandates on hold, meaning they’d remain partially phased in to K–3 classrooms while grades 4–12 would use Indiana’s previous standards until the state reviewed Common Core.

Since then, Pence called for “uncommonly high” standards written “by Hoo-siers for Hoo-siers”; state Superintendent Glenda Ritz walked out of a state board of education meeting and sued the board when board member Brad Oliver moved that it follow the law by reviewing the standards; and the governor established a new education agency under his control, not Ritz’s.

Common Core has been besieged by parents and academics for approximately two years, leading to legislative challenges against it in approximately half the states this spring alone. They’ve flagged a number of concerns, including the private process that created the standards, legally suspect Obama administration demands that states adopt them and correspond national tests, the standards’ poor academic quality, loopholes that allow private entities to collect children’s personal data and give access to it to the federal government, and forcing the standards on teachers through test results that affect their job security.

More than 850 Hoosiers submitted online comments on the draft standards, said Lou Ann Baker, a spokes-

woman for Pence’s education agency. “That’s a lot,” she said. Typically, few citizens comment on state standards proposals. Indiana also recently proposed new social studies standards, for example, which local media has not yet reported and even keyed-in grassroots activists just recently discovered, according to Heather Crossin of Hoosiers Against Common Core.

Storm of Criticism

State board of education member Andrea Neal, who criticized Common Core before Pence appointed her to the board, met with Pence to discuss the draft on March 5. Neal, a middle-school English and history teacher, says she is deeply concerned Indiana will approve subpar academic requirements. She called the draft a “fiasco.”

Neal told the governor “this is more than federalism; it’s about the quality of the standards,” she wrote in an email to School Reform News. “He reiterated that he wants standards that are ‘uncommonly high.’”

That description doesn’t fit the current draft standards, she said, and even Common Core supporters agree.

The draft standards would lead to “the curriculum being too crowded, making it virtually impossible to properly teach or learn,” said Derek Redelman, a vice president of the Indiana Chamber of Commerce, in a press release announcing the chamber’s analysis of the draft. The chamber has opposed all efforts to replace Common Core until just recently.

Foxes Guarding the Henhouse

Pence’s education agency, the Center for Education and Career Innovation (CECI), has been steering the Common Core rewrite, but with a large number of hands on the wheel from Common Core supporters.

Crossin and fellow activist mom Erin Tuttle found the state’s two panels assigned to choose draft standards and evaluate those choices are one-third to one-half comprised of people who publicly supported Common Core. That likely explains why the draft looks so much like Common Core. In addition, eight people sit on both panels, meaning they will evaluate their own work.

“I know some of [the panel members] have testified in favor of Common Core not because of ideology but because they believed they were better standards,” Oliver said. “You have two very different competing philosophies about standards right now.”

The small army of grassroots Hoosiers who pushed the state to reconsider Common Core didn’t spend hours driving to legislative sessions, public hearings, and rallies to get Common Core back in classrooms, Crossin said.

“Most of us thought we’d moved beyond the debate of whether we in Indiana should reject Common Core, but those in positions of power clearly do not agree,” she said.

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is a research fellow of The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
South Carolina Considers Version of Parent Trigger

By Ashley Bateman

A lthough most states would allow parents to petition the state to overhauls their school, but calls for clarity may push the measure to the back burner.

Bill sponsor state Rep. Bill Herbkersman (R-Beaufort and Jasper Counties) attended a poor-performing high school.

“It affects your whole future and the future of your family,” he said. “Everybody deserves a good education, and the traditional education community is holding back school choices. It’s reprehensible. The short term is about the money and the long term is about quality of life.”

Events in Jasper County sparked the bill. The school board there keeps rating its superintendent, Vashti Washington, satisfactory despite parent rallies to remove her and the schools repeatedly being ranked failing by federal standards.

“This is ultimately what is going to turn around education in South Carolina: putting parents in charge and deciding what’s best for them and their family,” said Ellen Weaver, president of The Palmetto Policy Forum. “Especially in rural counties like Jasper County, where people don’t have a lot of choice.”

The bill would let the state replace a failing school’s leaders and poor-performing staff if 51 percent of parents whose kids attend that school petition the state to overhaul the school.

“The school district is one of the largest employers” in Jasper County, Davidson said. “You are asking [some] people to sign themselves out of a job.”

Reinventing the Wheel?

A similar law already on the books lets the state step into schools in case of emergency, notes Ben Boychuk, a policy advisor for The Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News.

“In South Carolina’s case, ... a new parent-oriented law might serve more as a backstop or redundancy in the best sense of the word,” he said. “If state officials don’t step in, maybe parents can.”

Letters and pleas to the governor to declare a state of emergency in Jasper County have gone unanswered, Davidson said. So the current law may not adequately represent parents, Herbkersman notes.

“Right now the statute has defined measures that preclude the parents from direct involvement,” he said.

Groundswell of Interest

Herbkersman said he’s seen “a groundswell” of interest in his proposal, primarily from parents desperate to get their kids into a better education situation.

“There are a lot of parents who are so involved, but there are also parents who could [not] care less,” he said. “The parents who could [not] care less are electing these sorry school board members.”

The best features of a Parent Trigger requirement is also problematic, she said.

“The school district is one of the largest employers” in Jasper County, Davidson said. “You are asking [some] people to sign themselves out of a job.”

Concern Over Language

Denise Davidson is a parent organizer in Jasper County, working to educate citizens and parents on how badly the districts’ schools perform.

Although she believes intervention is necessary, she does not support the current bill, because it may allow local districts to retain control of failing schools despite parent petitions.

“Our school board is the predominant problem here because they keep rewarding the current superintendent. It’s been going on for years,” Davidson said.

The 51 percent parent signature requirement is also problematic, she said.

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Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.
Common Core Support Collapses in Oklahoma

By Patrick McGuigan
Oklahoma could become the second state to abandon the controversial Common Core curriculum mandates for public schools.

The state Senate Education Committee in March unanimously approved its version of House Bill 3399, which passed the House on a 78–12 vote two weeks earlier. It requires the state to drop Common Core and replace it with state-controlled curriculum and tests.

On March 24, Indiana became the first state to withdraw from the Common Core standards. Like Oklahoma, Indiana adopted the standards in 2010, but controversy surrounding the process steadily built, leading to legislation Gov. Mike Pence (R) signed to withdraw.

Common Core specifies what K–12 English and math curriculum and tests must include at each grade level. The Obama administration pushed states to sign onto Common Core months before it was published. To date, 45 states have done so.

Pressure on the Governor
Complicating the picture for Oklahoma Gov. Mary Fallin (R), a past supporter of Common Core, is the fact that her likely Democratic opponent, state Rep. Joe Dorman of Rush Springs, has long opposed the curriculum. Dorman restated that position in late February, drawing praise from conservative education reformers in the process.

In an interview, Dorman said he supports the amended version of HB 3399. Republican lawmakers are split over whether to support the bill. Grassroots activists are fighting to keep the bill from being watered down in order to get Fallin to sign it.

Fallin began to “decouple” from the curriculum “brand” last fall in response to grassroots pressure against her support for Common Core, in an executive order insisting the state would adopt its own standards free of federal or national control.

More recently, Fallin has said she would sign legislation to underscore Oklahoma’s independent process in curriculum design.

After the Senate panel’s vote, President Pro Tem Brian Bingman (R-Sapulpa) said in a prepared statement, “Our challenge is to ensure Oklahoma students complete their education with the English and math skills they’ll need for college, Career-Tech, or to go directly into the workforce.

“House Bill 3399 ensures Oklahomans will be the ones to create the rigorous academic standards necessary so our children can compete in the 21st century without federal interference,” he said.

Jenni White, a founder of Restore Oklahoma Public Education (ROPE), the leading activist group opposing Common Core in the state, said she supported the bill moving onto the Senate floor.

However, White cautioned: “The grassroots cannot go back to sleep. We have to keep a close eye on the process over the year or more.”

Writing Oklahoma Standards
The legislation sets a deadline of August 1, 2015 for the state Board of Education to promulgate new state guidelines, which would go into effect by 2017.

“In the last two weeks, we have reset the playing field,” said state Sen. Josh Brecheen (R-Coalgate), a co-sponsor of HB 3399 in the upper chamber. “School districts and parents are happy because this legislation will remove the requirement for parents to keep a political sword in their hands to protect their children.”

Common Core is under attack from left, right, and center. This spring, serious challenges to Common Core are underway in approximately 24 states. Of those, the most intense opposition is in New York, Tennessee, and Wisconsin.

After months of fighting, foes of Common Core in Oklahoma appear on the verge of victory. Praising the momentum was Ginger Tinney, executive director of Professional Oklahoma Educators (POE), a nonunion association.

“Oklahoma already has a proven track record of developing excellent academic standards,” she said. She pointed to academic studies finding little or no difference between Common Core and Oklahoma’s previous math and science standards.

“Common Core has been extremely divisive for our state,” Tinney said. “[The] vote in the Senate [committee] is a step in the right direction. However, I know not to be too trusting and to know this may only be to pacify the general public until we get past the election.”

Business Opposition
The state Chamber of Commerce has expressed opposition to the legislation.

“There is no doubt that staying the course with Common Core would be better for Oklahoma’s students, teachers, schools and businesses,” said Vice President Gwendolyn Caldwell in a statement released by her office. “The business community will continue to work for an education system that ensures high school graduates are ready for college or a career. So we hope the business community has a seat at the table when the new standards are developed.”

“As we work to raise the bar in our schools, it is essential that higher academic standards are developed and implemented by and for Oklahomans,” Fallin said in a statement. “We have no interest in relinquishing control over education to the federal government or outside groups.

“I support passing legislation that increases classroom rigor and accountability while guaranteeing that Oklahoma public education is protected from federal interference.”

MARY FALLIN, GOVERNOR - OKLAHOMA

“I support passing legislation that increases classroom rigor and accountability while guaranteeing that Oklahoma public education is protected from federal interference.”

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SAPULPA, OKLAHOMA
Okla. Lawmaker Plans to Offer Parent Trigger Bill

By Anna Giaritelli

One lawmaker is working to push Oklahoma to follow the example of California and a handful of other states by implementing Parent Trigger laws.

The bill—which will be up for consideration in 2015—could enable Sooner State residents to petition the state to reform their kids’ failing schools.

State Rep. Jason Nelson (R-Oklahoma City) has been the state’s biggest proponent of the Parent Empowerment Act, a bill that fits with other school choice initiatives.

Nelson plans to push for the legislation again in 2015 after his unsuccessful effort to pass education savings account legislation this spring made it clear a Parent Trigger bill “would not pass out of committee” this year, explained Megan Winburn, Nelson’s legislative assistant.

Parent Trigger laws allow parents to hold accountable schools with poor performance records after exhausting all other avenues of attempting to trigger change, Nelson said. The laws require certain reforms be enacted if more than 50 percent of parents and guardians sign a petition for new school leadership, staff, or structure.

“If parents were to do a petition, that’s obviously a more public event than a few parents here and there around the state choosing to go to a different school. If a group of parents organize and start circulating a petition, that’s going to make the newspaper,” Nelson told Oklahoma Watch.

Uphill Climb

The task is not easy, as California parents can attest. School administrators do not necessarily allow parents to have access to other parents’ names and addresses, making the petition very much a door-to-door pursuit.

“Parents who decide to gather signatures on a petition are usually people who have exhausted other options. They’re the people who have already met with the school principal, and have gone to the school board meetings, and gotten unsatisfactory results,” said Ben Boychuk, an education research fellow at the Chicago-based Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News.

The first Parent Trigger was passed just four years ago in California. It allows parents to petition for their child’s school to be converted into a charter school, the option most have taken to this point. Others have chosen to use the threat of a petition to get their school to make changes they want. Opponents say it makes for enmity within a community, but Boychuk said that is just an excuse to cover up its potential for positive change.

“It misses the fact that these communities are already divided. Many parents seeking to exercise their rights under the Parent Trigger have already tried the sort of ‘collaboration’ that the bills’ opponents are touting, which amounts to ‘sit down and shut up,’” said Boychuk.

More than 20 states have launched failed attempts to include similar laws in their schools but ran into opposition, primarily from teachers unions.


Homeschoolers More Likely to Be Politically Tolerant, New Study Finds

A new study of university students finds those who were homeschooled in K–12 are more likely to be politically tolerant than their private- or public-schooled counterparts.

Researcher Albert Cheng found little difference between the political tolerance levels of public and private school students. He defined political tolerance as “the willingness to extend basic civil liberties to political or social groups that hold views with which one disagrees.”

Cheng interviewed students at a Christian university in the western United States. He asked them to name their least-liked political group—such as Republicans or gay activists—then say whether they would extend civil liberties to those groups. They were asked to respond to statements such as, “Books that are written by members of [the least-liked group] should be banned from the public library,” and “I would allow members of [the least-liked group] to live in my neighborhood.”

Homeschoolers were less likely to want to restrict or shun people they disagreed with. Cheng suggests two reasons for this: Homeschoolers “may attain a greater degree of self-actualization” from their “personalized instruction [that] enables students to be taught a consistent worldview,” and religious views taught in home and private schools “are consistent with political tolerance and other values necessary for a liberal democracy.”

— Staff reports

“If parents were to do a petition, that’s obviously a more public event than a few parents here and there around the state choosing to go to a different school. [T]hat’s going to make the newspaper.”

JASON NELSON
STATE REPRESENTATIVE
OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA

HELPING KIDS SUCCEED

Learning is easier and faster when properly designed incentive systems are used. But teachers are trained not to use them—almost entirely for ideological reasons.

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Hope Deferred for Mississippi’s Overlooked Special-Needs Students

By Anna Giaritelli

Mississippi’s Department of Education has made a habit of pouring taxpayer money into lawsuits against parents of special-needs students rather than funding improvements in the state’s subpar program as parents have requested.

“School districts often spend more money in lawsuits fighting parents of special-needs kids than they would spend to educate the kids if they just did what the parents wanted,” said Allison Hertog, an attorney for Making School Work.

Mississippi has a long history of failing many of its special-needs students. Only 23 percent of students in its Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) program graduate high school, compared to the state Department of Education’s goal of 66 percent.

High Dropout Rates
Nearby Texas and Arkansas graduate students with learning disabilities at rates greater than 77 percent, higher than Mississippi’s overall graduation rate.

Unsuccessful students have no substantive proof they are capable of pursuing a bachelor’s degree or career.

Between 2007 and 2012, 15,529 Mississippi special-needs students left school without a diploma, according to U.S. Office of Special Education Programs exit data. The price tag: $1.2 billion in special-education costs for few success stories, considering one in 11 Mississippi public school students goes through the program.

Seventy percent of special-needs students have either a language impairment, specific learning disability, or health impairment. These tend to be relatively minor impediments, but many of these students still will not receive a degree.

Taxpayer Money Goes to Fight Parents
The state’s education officials concede its school districts are not satisfying parents’ desires and a legal obligation to educate all students.

According to an in-depth report from the Jackson Clarion-Ledger, “newly appointed state Superintendent Carey Wright and interim state Special Education Director Therrell Myers say they’re aware of the problem and have made its fix a priority.”

“The problem is that school districts almost always think they are meeting the needs of these children and are willing to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal fees fighting parents,” said Jameson Taylor, vice president for policy at the Mississippi Center for Public Policy.

One state representative was honest about the lack of forward movement in the Hospitality State.

“Special-education kids are more expensive, and to some districts they’re just a bother. I hate to put it that way,” former House Education Chairman Cecil Brown (D-Jackson) told the Clarion-Ledger. “It’s not something administrators are well trained in.”

It’s the parents who have resolved to be the catalysts for reform, only after wasting time and taxpayer money trying to rally district officials to improve in serving their kids’ needs.

‘Fighting the Family’
The Mississippi Department of Education oversees schools’ compliance with IDEA. Unless a complaint reaches its office, the department will not get involved with low graduation rates.

Thirty-one complaints reached the department in the 2011-12 school year, and not all resulted in thorough investigations.

One case stemmed from a complaint that claimed the Quitman Consolidated School District refused to educate two autistic twin boys.

When a parent files a request for a due process hearing or state complaint with the Mississippi Department of Education, the school district pays substantial attorney fees to fight the allegations.

“The school district spent roughly $1 million fighting the family,” explained Emily LeCoz, an investigative reporter for the Clarion-Ledger.

“The solution is to change the incentives. Give schools an incentive to work with parents, instead of against them. And give parents options when their school is not meeting their child’s needs,” said Taylor.

School Choice a Potential Answer
Parents wanted Mississippi to be next in line, behind Arizona, to adopt an education savings account law that would grant special-needs students $6,000 per year toward customizing their education as a parent or guardian sees fit.

On March 12, the Mississippi Senate passed HB 765, the Equal Opportunity for Students with Special Needs Act, but the bill failed in the House in April. Republicans voting against the bill were key to its defeat.

The legislation would have freed parents from having to rely on the state or the district their child is stuck in. “For a fraction of the cost, parents could be put in the driver’s seat and given options for services outside the status quo,” added Taylor.

Mandy Rogers is a firm believer in the benefits of school choice for special-needs kids.

“Without having to navigate through an emotional rollercoaster that comes with a legal proceeding which involves special-education issues, parents can focus on the educational needs of their child,” said Rogers, president of the Madison-based Parents United Together group for parents of special-needs kids.

“Usually the response we see is that change takes time,” said Rogers. “Our response is, ‘It has been 39 years—how much longer do Mississippi’s children have to wait?’”

Anna Giaritelli resides in Washington, DC and specializes in congressional reporting. She has written for Roll Call, The Oregonian, the Washington Examiner, and The Daily Caller.
Minnesota Gov. Mark Dayton signed an anti-bullying bill whose expansive provisions have raised concerns from lawmakers, parents, and school administrators over limiting free speech and vastly increasing school expenses and invasive data collection on children.

“The Safe and Supportive Minnesota Schools Act is the “worst policy I have ever seen in my time here,” said state Rep. Sondra Erickson (R-Princeton), who is minority leader on the House Education Committee.

The Minnesota Superintendents Association and Minnesota School Boards Association said the law is “overreaching,” “dangerous,” and an “unfunded mandate.”

The most recent Minnesota Student Survey, taken in 2010, shows students report less bullying in the state than in previous years, and that 93 percent of parents feel safe at school.

Free-Speech Concerns
Now that the bill has passed, Minnesota students exchanging any type of language that creates “a real or perceived imbalance of power” could end up in the principal’s office or counseled by a newly hired staff member who would be legally required to track such incidents.

The broad language states “prohibited conduct” includes discriminatory conduct based on a number of characteristics including race, ethnicity, color, sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression, adding, “prohibited conduct need not be based on any particular characteristic defined” but includes any conduct that is “objectively offensive” to another student.

The text of the bill insists it will not “interfere with a person’s rights of religious expression and free speech and expression under the First Amendment of the United States Constitution.”

On the contrary, said Hinkley-Finlayson Superintendent Rob Prater: “With the bill’s definition, bullying can be anytime anything makes someone feel bad.”

State Sen. Tony Lourey (DFL-Kerrick) says Minnesota doesn’t have enough anti-bullying laws on the books and doesn’t think this bill would limit free speech.

“I have heard about the allegations of an indoctrination agenda, and I don’t see that myself. I think this comes down to where you are at and a choice of who you are,” he said.

Sex Education Controversy
The Minnesota Catholic Conference’s 2013–14 legislative platform says, “Combating bullying should never be a pretext to impose an agenda of groups of people, or to undermine the rights of parents to bestow their religious or moral values on their children.”

Advocates of alternative sexuality want to force their agenda on both public and private schools, Jason Adkins, the conference’s executive director, told the Pioneer Press. OutFront Minnesota, an LGBT group, was the bill’s most prominent advocate.

The law is “dangerous” and “about using the power of the legislature to control your children’s attitudes and values about human sexuality,” said Barb Anderson of the Minnesota Child Protection League to a crowd gathered in Hutchinson, Minnesota.

Don’t Tell Mom
An earlier version of the bill said parents would be notified of bullying incidents only “at the school administrator’s discretion” to “protect the target of the prohibited conduct.” The law includes a “presumption” that schools will notify parents of incidents.

“The state cannot simply legislate bullying out of schools,” said East Central School Superintendent Andrew Almos. “I would like to see the legislation be less prescriptive and allow school staff to focus on working with kids to improve the culture and climate in our schools. Initiatives are well underway in our local communities.”

He noted local programs such as Rachel’s Challenge have helped schools reduce bullying.

“My frustrations with this [legislative] effort are focused mainly on the perception that schools do very little to prevent acts of bullying and hazing. This is simply not true. Schools day in and day out work to provide safe and supportive [environments],” Almos said.

Data-Collection and Privacy Concerns
An early version of the bill would have required the state to publish annual “School Performance Report Cards” summarizing data on incidents of student bullying, cyberbullying, harassment, and intimidation and the remedial responses to the incidents. The bill also allowed Minnesota departments to share the data. This language was removed after protests from lawmakers and school leaders.

“I am not comfortable with taking this data about kids,” Prater said.

Erickson noted the rising incidence of data leaks and expressed worries a childish incident could influence kids’ futures, such as college admissions and job opportunities.

Another ‘Unfunded Mandate’
“How much will this cost, and who will pay for it? It is hard to know what this means, exactly, or how it will ultimately be implemented. In general, I believe that this is the wrong approach,” said Pine City Schools Superintendent Wayne Gilman.

Prater said the bill would make his district “take on another staff member” to deal with reports and investigate each situation, costing approximately $75,000 per year.
By Bruce Edward Walker

Kansas lawmakers sent the governor a bill that would provide up to $8,000 for private school tuition from scholarship funds established with donations from businesses. If signed, the measure would be the state’s first private school choice program.

“Students with disabilities or from families earning up to 185 percent of the federal poverty level could qualify to receive the scholarships. That’s an annual income of $44,000 for a family of four.

“This is a corporate credit scholarship bill that will help low-income and special-needs students,” said James Franko, vice president and policy director of the Kansas Policy Institute. “It’s an opportunity for kids who need it the most who aren’t getting what they need from public schools.”

Senate Bill 22 would grant businesses a 70 percent tax credit on the amount they donate to nonprofit organizations that award K–12 scholarships, up to an annual statewide cap of $10 million. That would allow for 2,000 scholarships averaging $5,000. Kansas currently pay an average of $9,700 per student in public schools, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, and the state supreme court recently ordered the legislature to spend more.

SB 22 is a “great idea” and “a great start,” said Michael Chartier, a state programs and government relations director at the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice. “I’d like to see the Kansas legislature broaden it a bit to open up eligibility for who receives the scholarships. Hopefully, this will gain some traction so more children can qualify.”

‘A Great Start’

Tax-credit scholarships are the most prevalent school choice option, with 17 tax-credit scholarship programs currently operating in 13 states. Because the scholarships are funded entirely by private money that never enters state coffers, they are the least burdened by government mandates. State supreme courts typically agree these programs use private, rather than tax, money.

“Americans need to decide what’s more important: funding a child’s education and spurring educational innovation or funding a governmental system because that’s the way we’ve been doing it for decades.”

KYLE OLSON, CEO
EDUCATION ACTION GROUP

‘A Great Start’

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“Americans need to decide what’s more important: funding a child’s education and spurring educational innovation or funding a governmental system because that’s the way we’ve been doing it for decades,” said Kyle Olson, CEO of the Michigan-based Education Action Group. “If parents—who know their children best—decide an alternative is best for their children, why not let the dollars follow the child, even in an indirect way as is being proposed in Kansas?”

Franko concurs. “I’d like to see this program expanded to cover more children,” he said. “Ultimately, what we’d like to see is education dollars following all Kansas children to the schools their parents select for them.”

Bruce Edward Walker writes from Chicago, IL 60606

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Senate Bill 22—House Substitute, Kansas State Legislature Committee on Education: http://www.kslegislature.org/li/b2013_14/measures/sb22/


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By Ashley Bateman

In the 2013–14 school year, nearly 300,000 more students entered public charter schools, 600 more charters opened, and total charter enrollment increased 13 percent to account for more than 2.5 million children.

Now home to 1,130 charter schools, California led the nation in openings, with 104 new charters established in 2013–14.

“Charter schools are growing, very simply because there’s a need for them,” said Larry Sand, president of the California Teachers Empowerment Network. “Too many traditional K–12s aren’t doing a good job.”

Potential for Improvement

Despite the dramatic growth in charters, state laws have “huge room for improvement” by examining what other states have done to allow for good charter schools, Rees said.

One good policy that helps charters grow is to let people hoping to open one appeal a local school board’s decision to turn them down, Izumi said.

“Charter organizers can appeal to the county board of education and then to the California State Board of Education,” Izumi said. “For example, even though the Los Angeles school board turned down the renewal of two high-performing charters, the organizers of those two charters can appeal to the Los Angeles County Board of Education and then to the State Board. It is expected that the charter petitions will be renewed on appeal.”

Widespread, bipartisan support for charters contrasts with opposition from teachers unions, he said.

Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown championed charters early in his political career and has vetoed numerous anti-charter-school bills.

“State laws and restrictive union collective bargaining agreements have made the delivery of high-quality educational services very difficult for regular public schools,” Izumi said. “Charter schools are not subject to most of these restrictions, so they can better deliver high-quality education to students, which is why there is a great demand by parents for more charters.”

Parent Demand Pivotal

Charter school enrollment has doubled approximately every five or six years in California since they first arrived. It can be difficult for lawmakers to push for charters, Rees said, so parent demand has really driven the increase.

“At each stage in the process, people have wondered how it could possibly continue. … The sector itself develops the capacity for growth, and the general public notices more and more,” said Jed Wallace, president of the California Charter Schools Association.

Parents drive demand for charters because it is their 50,000 children sitting on waiting lists to enter the schools, Sand said.

“The level of satisfaction at charter schools is very high,” Wallace said. “The number one thing driving public opinion is … word of mouth, people talking about their experiences. Virtually all Californians now know somebody who has a child in a charter school, and that’s turning into a base of support that’s growing every year.”

Focusing on Quality

Nationwide, 200 charters closed during the 2013–14 school year, including 39 in California. Rees sees this as positive, because it means low-performing charters cannot continue to take students and tax dollars.

Replicating great charter schools and closing unsuccessful ones is a key to growth, she said.

“We’re not doing growth for growth’s sake,” Wallace said. “We want to make sure that we’re serving students very well. We’ve seen the academic performance of students over the past few years improve significantly, [and] we reduced by about a third the percentage of charter schools that are significantly underperforming.”

Speed Bumps to Growth

Despite the popularity of these public schools, “teacher unions will continue to fight charters by getting their allies in the state legislature to introduce anti-charter legislation,” Izumi said.

In 2013, for example, a California bill would have required all school employees, including bus drivers and janitors, to support a school’s effort to become a charter. Brown vetoed the union-supported bill.

“The unions have also worked hard to put their allies on local school boards in order to deny charter school petitions,” Izumi noted. “The more charters that are established in California, the more threatened the unions will feel and the more money and lobbying they will use to stop charter creation.”

“Policymakers are going to be in a bind because the people seem to want [charters] … yet the good old ‘entrenched special interests’ don’t always like them,” Sand said. “School boards don’t, and teachers unions certainly don’t. … The legislature is going to be caught in the middle.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.
$23 Mil. in Pennsylvania K–12 Scholarships Are Going to Waste

By Ashley Bateman

One-hundred and seventy schools in Philadelphia are chronically failing, yet Pennsylvania students currently cannot access $22.8 million in potential scholarships for better schools.

That’s how much money businesses have yet to donate before the state’s new tax-credit scholarship program reaches its cap this year. The program gives businesses tax credits worth up to 90 percent of their donations to nonprofit organizations that give K–12 scholarships.

The Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit (OSTC), now in its second year, is still gaining exposure. Last year, $33 million in credits went unused.

“Parents deeply want this choice, and we need to help magnify the voices of so many parents whose children are trapped in failing schools,” said Casey Carter, CEO of Faith in the Future, a charity that raises money to help kids afford Catholic schools.

An education campaign to link scholarship organizations and businesses is underway, but it still has a lot of work to do.

Slow on the Uptake

“One factor why the money hasn’t been used rapidly and depleted is because Pennsylvania has one of the best school choice programs in the country,” said Alberta Wilson, founder and CEO of Faith First Educational Assistance Corporation.

OSTC is a new companion to the state’s popular Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) program. It directs scholarships specifically to children living in failing school districts.

Because OSTC passed in midsummer 2012, it had little time to get up and running for the 2012–13 school year, said Priya Abraham, a senior policy analyst at the Commonwealth Foundation for Public Policy Alternatives.

EITC had a similarly slow start but proved extremely popular over time, Abraham said.

Also, some businesses may have maxed out tax credits through EITC and so can’t qualify for OSTC, or they may still be learning about OSTC, Wilson said.

Thousands Exercise Choice

“With the expansion of the EITC and this new program, there are 17,000 kids on scholarships now who are going to their school of choice, so overall it’s been quite a success,” Wilson said.

Crystal Williams has three children who attend The Christian Academy through tax-credit scholarships. She learned of the scholarships through a parent engagement meeting Wilson organized. Williams said the application process was lengthy but not complicated. Her kids could never have attended their school without financial assistance, she said.

“My children all function well above grade level, and it has helped them to grow socially,” she said. “They also have opportunities to perform community service. I have found our school to be a warm, caring, and nurturing environment where my children are able to focus on learning instead of surviving in school.”

‘Public Education Crisis’

Wilson organized Operation Philadelphia Public Education Crisis Solution Expo to free up those unused millions. The first such expo was February 27 at the University of Pennsylvania and included national, state, and city leaders.

“We are forming a coalition of very diverse groups who see, who recognize, the very real need for groups representing different constituents to get together and get the word out that this is new net money and we need to … solve the education problem in Philadelphia,” Carter said.

The Philadelphia school district has been plagued by financial and academic woes for at least a decade, and in the past year it had to lay off thousands of workers just to make payroll.

Of the 406 failing schools in Pennsylvania, 177 are in Philadelphia. More than 80 percent of Philadelphia fourth- and eighth-graders are not proficient in math and reading, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress. That’s why the first expo was in Philadelphia, Wilson said.

Because children on tax-credit scholarships get a better education for less money, the program improves Philadelphia’s finances, Carter noted.

“Getting this money deployed … to send children to schools of choice is good for the Philadelphia school district, to give them the one to three years they need in order for the turnaround effort to take effect,” he said.

Coalition partners met again on March 27 to discuss May’s expo.

“We don’t want to see that money go back to the Commonwealth unused again,” Wilson said.

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

Report: Feds Fund Duplicate Early Childhood Programs

The federal government funds 45 early childhood programs and five separate subsidies through the tax code, according to a Government Accountability Office report. Federal spending on programs targeted at small children topped $14.2 billion in 2012, the report says.

Multiple agencies administer these programs, creating the potential for duplicating programs and gaps between the various offerings, the report states.

“Administering similar programs in different agencies can create an environment in which programs may not serve children and families as efficiently and effectively as possible,” it notes.

GAO concludes agencies should consolidate programs and work together more often to address these inefficiencies. Currently, the Obama administration is working to expand government spending and activity concerning small children. President Barack Obama pushed again for federal preschool in his 2014 State of the Union address, and the U.S. Department of Education is about to release $250 million in federal grants to expand government preschool within states.

— Staff reports
Virtual School Gives Teen Entrepreneur Freedom

By Sherri Ackerman

When Willow Tufano left a public school for the gifted three years ago and enrolled in Florida Virtual School, she discovered a doorway to opportunity.

No longer confined to a typical school day, the eighth-grader spent mornings and afternoons combing Craigslist and garage sales for electronics and other items, then sold them for a profit. At night, she studied English and algebra, keeping up her grades and socking away enough cash to buy a house with her mom, a real estate broker.

At 14, Willow became a landlord. Then she saved enough for another house. Two years later, the Palm Island, Florida teen has sold both houses and is finishing her sophomore year online with Florida Virtual School, earning mostly A’s and B’s, while fielding offers from Hollywood for a reality TV show.

None of those things likely would have happened, say Willow and her mother, if she couldn’t pick the best learning option for her. “I’m doing my school work at 2 in the morning instead of 9 a.m.,” Willow said. “I really like that flexibility.”

‘What Works for Us’
The story of Willow’s ingenuity has circulated far and wide, from NPR to the Huffington Post to The Ellen DeGeneres Show. What remains largely untold is how education’s fast-changing landscape and, more specifically, the expansion of online learning, helped propel her success.

When Willow needs an afternoon free to show a house or sell something—or meet with an entertainment attorney, as she did recently—she can take it. “She came home at 6 p.m. and did school work until one in the morning,” recalled Willow’s mom, Shannon Moore. “That’s what works for us.”

Florida Virtual School (FLVS) is the nation’s largest public provider of online learning, which former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush recently described as a “national model.” The program has grown from 77 enrollments in 1997 when it began to an award-winning public school district with five schools serving more than 410,000 students.

Reform Innovation

For nearly two decades, FLVS has been on the forefront of education reform—first as its own entity, and later partnering with districts for local franchises. It develops most of its own content, using student feedback as a guide.

Willow and her mom liked the program’s credibility. But what really sold them, they said, was its focus on students—their wants and needs.

Despite getting into the Pineview School for the Gifted in Osprey, Florida, Willow, who has ADHD, struggled with her studies. She grew frustrated with attending classes all day, then spending three to four hours a night doing homework.

“We noticed in the seventh grade, it wasn’t working for her,” said Moore, a wife and mother of three daughters, all of whom attended public and private schools and were homeschooled during various years. But at Florida Virtual School, “It seems more individualized.”

Meeting Individual Needs

For those with special needs, such as Willow, FLVS can be a huge help, spokeswoman Tania Clow said. Students aren’t required to sit for hours on end. They can take frequent breaks and walk around. And they don’t have to take medication—something Willow and her mom didn’t want her to do.

For her second semester, Willow has a full schedule of classes: photography, geometry, English II, earth sciences, world history, and Spanish. If she falls behind, which she admits she does occasionally, her mom gets a call from a teacher.

Online learning provides oversight, Moore said, while giving her daughter enough leeway to explore her dreams. Every few weeks, Willow travels to Chicago, where she stays with a close friend. She plans eventually to attend community college there before returning to Florida to finish her degree—maybe in business at New College in Sarasota, which her older sister attends.

Willow makes her own travel arrangements, spends her own money on plane tickets, and is learning to navigate a new city. Those are skills that likely will help her when it comes time to start a new job or some other endeavor, her mom said. Flexibility with schooling has given her the freedom to master them.

“Not everyone fits in the same box,” Moore said. “There needs to be choices.”

Sherri Ackerman (sackerman@stepupforstudents.org) is the associate editor for RedefinED, the blog of Florida’s tax-credit-scholarship program. Article reprinted from RedefinED with permission.
Utah Tries Online Preschool, Considers Expansion

By Bruce Edward Walker

Utah legislators are debating whether to expand the state’s digital UPSTART preschool program or allocate more funding for traditional pre-kindergarten classroom education. At issue is how digital learning compares in effectiveness with in-person preschool.

State Sen. Aaron Osmond (R-Jordan) introduced Senate Bill 42 on January 16. It requests an additional $6 million to expand programs for at-risk preschoolers and would fund computer labs for use outside regular school hours. State Sen. Stuart Adams (R-Layton) is asking the state for an additional $1 million to $2 million to expand the UPSTART program, which was allocated $2.2 million for the 2013–14 school year.

In its fifth year of educating Utah preschoolers, UPSTART currently instructs 1,500 students. Another 3,700 are pre-enrolled for the 2014–15 school year. Students are supposed to spend 15 minutes every day on what essentially looks like a learning game, where cartoon animals help them sound out letters and words and count.

State Sen. Howard Stephenson (R-Salt Lake) says a third-party analysis found UPSTART students “showing twice to three times the growth of students in traditional preschool programs. This includes phonetic awareness, colors, shapes, letters, sounds, science, and even basic statistics.”

Reading by Kindergarten

The Utah-based Waterford Institute, which developed and runs UPSTART, recently was awarded an $11.5 million federal grant to expand into rural Utah. Adams is asking for more money to fund it along the state’s unserved Wasatch Front.

The online preschool was developed after a Pew Trust-organized conference in Big Sky, Montana several years ago, Stephenson said.

“Key players from our State Office of Education (SOE) discussed for three days how best to meet the needs of four-year-olds in our state,” he said, noting a plan to require preschool “would be adding a 14th grade” to the state’s K–12 system, which he said “would make it harder to stretch Utah’s education dollars.”

Utah currently has the nation’s highest birthrate, making “another demand on funding extremely difficult,” Stephenson noted, because of the high child-to-taxpayer ratio. This is one of the reasons Utah is the nation’s most economical spender on K–12 education, at $6,000 per student. The SOE requested proposals for educational software for children to use at home or in daycare. Waterford’s was one of two proposals it received, and it ultimately won the contract.

Stephenson says UPSTART is highly successful and many students involved in it “are generally entering kindergarten already reading, and many kindergartners are placed in first-grade reading groups.” He said the program helps address the “huge number of students who are not reading at grade level by third grade.”

Bringing Preschool ‘Into the Home’

Pre-kindergarten digital learning could be an inexpensive way to teach young students, says Julia Freeland, an education research fellow for the Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation, a research institute in San Mateo, California.

“There is a burgeoning market of businesses building on sharing economies,” she wrote on the institute’s blog. “These businesses use technology platforms to facilitate peer-to-peer rentals or sharing through businesses like city bike shares, Airbnb, or GoodShuffle. Taken in the pre-K context, an enabling technology to facilitate sharing could expand access to sharing and coordinating childcare or educational resources at a low transaction cost. This platform could then grow to serve all sorts of community renting, sharing, or coordinating functions.”

UPSTART is “a perfect complement to programs such as Head Start,” said Diane Weaver, Waterford’s marketing director. “We have several Head Start centers that use the same Waterford adaptive learning software as UPSTART offers in the home.”

Weaver added: “The difference is that while Head Start focuses on the whole child and less on cognitive development, UPSTART focuses only on the cognitive preparation needed for kindergarten and reading readiness. Not every child has access to preschool centers, and some parents prefer to keep children at home until kindergarten. This is especially true in rural areas, which accounts for about 30 percent of U.S. children. UPSTART allows Waterford to be wherever the children need us to be. When a child does not have access to a center, school, or district with Waterford curriculum, UPSTART brings it into the home.”

Personalized Learning

A technical evaluation of UPSTART’s third year in Utah, conducted by the Evaluation and Training Institute, concluded UPSTART was seven times more effective than traditional preschool programs. Research on preschool programs typically finds their effects fade after approximately four years.

The ETI report also found children using UPSTART scored higher on two standardized reading tests, Briggance and Bader. Test results from UPSTART children grew twice as fast as control groups on the Briggance test and three times as fast as control groups on the Bader test.

Although UPSTART focuses on cognitive skill mastery in reading, math, and science, parents have noted non-cognitive advantages as well, including confidence building, joy of learning, and English language learning. Weaver said. This type of learning “comes from the one-to-one delivery and safe environment that personalized learning through technology provides,” she explained.

Bruce Edward Walker writes from Michigan. He was managing editor of InfoTech & Telecom News from 2010 to 2012.

WEBINAR

Julia Freeland, “Can Pre-K Blaze the Way to Disruption?” The Christensen Institute, February 11, 2014: http://www.christenseninstitute.org/can-pre-k-blaze-the-way-to-disruption/

Ohio Children Harassed Over Common Core Test Opt-Out

By Joy Pullmann

A nine-year-old girl that is already uncomfortable with her body as it starts to change, and you hand her a paper that says ‘you need to exercise more’ while you serve hot dogs in the school cafeteria. Are you kidding me?” Lewis said.

“The superintendent was being personal and vindictive because he was angry. He decided to take it out on my kids,” Lewis said the day after the incident, her voice shaking. She said her children went to school the next morning as usual, but they were afraid of further confrontations.

Several other parents recently have asked Steiner to opt their children out of tests, Lewis said. She had consulted ODE before issuing her opt-out request, and the department also said her kids did not have to take state tests.

If families opt out, there may be consequences in some grades. Third-graders who don’t pass a certain reading test get held back a year, for example, and high school students must pass several exams to receive a diploma. Otherwise, Charlton said, parents are free to excuse their kids from tests, with no consequences.

A Parent’s Rights

Lewis wanted her kids released from the BMI screening for two reasons. First, “We feel that health information is private, and especially when it comes to our kids,” she said. “We would rather have that information kept between our family and our physician.” Last fall, the school had excused her third-grader from seeing a dentist who came to the school. “That’s our job to do. We take him to the dentist,” Lewis said.

Second, Lewis’s daughter came home one day last year with a report saying her BMI meant she was overweight.

“This is a nine-year-old girl that is already uncomfortable with her body as it starts to change, and you hand her a paper that says ‘you need to exercise more’ while you serve hot dogs in the school cafeteria. Are you kidding me?” Lewis said.

Local Concern Grows

The Common Core debate has heated up this school year in Celina City, a small town in western Ohio. Lewis and her husband began discussing the national standards and tests when their third-grader started coming home with new kinds of math problems. He was also “constantly coming home talking about how they were taking practice tests. It seemed like that was all he was doing,” Lewis said. One night, he cried because he was so stressed about the tests.

When she asked her kids’ teachers about the new math, they told her, “We have to do that this way because it’s going to be on the test,” she said. “Test, test, test—that’s all we heard.”

Lewis and some other mothers started to talk to each other about Common Core and look it up online. They began giving public presentations, writing to local newspapers, and inviting speakers. In February, they invited Heidi Huber, a grassroots leader who runs Ohioans Against Common Core. In March, they hosted Hillsdale College Professor Terrence Moore. The event was standing-room only inside Celina High School’s lecture hall, according to Celina newspaper The Daily Standard. The next day, Steiner issued his letter and visited Lewis’ kids in school.

“Some people don’t think it’s a big deal. Who cares if they weigh and mess with your kids?” Lewis said. “It doesn’t matter why; what matters is that we asked them not to do it.”

Steiner and Pohlman did not return phone messages requesting comment. After the BMI incident, Lewis says she’s concerned the disagreement about education policy among adults may hurt her kids again.

“I love our teachers. I support my teachers, but I am very fearful that they are going to start treating [my children] differently because of all of this,” Lewis said.

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New Advanced Placement Framework Distorts America’s History

By Jane Robbins and Larry Krieger

A dramatic, unilateral change is taking place in the content of the College Board’s Advanced Placement U.S. history course.

In fall 2014, almost half-a-million high school sophomores and juniors will learn a version of U.S. history very different from the course of study now in place.

Currently, a five-page topical outline gives teachers clear guidelines for their courses. This long-established outline conforms to the sequence of topics state and local boards of education have approved.

In contrast, the new, redesigned framework is a detailed 98-page document that does far more than list required topics.

This change in format is best described as a curricular coup that sets a number of dangerous precedents. By providing a detailed course of study that defines, discusses, and interprets “the required knowledge of each period,” the College Board has in effect supplanted local and state curricula by unilaterally assuming the authority to prioritize historic topics.

This inevitably means some topics will be magnified in importance and others will be minimized or even omitted. If concerned parents, educators, and elected public officials do not speak out, the College Board—led by David Coleman, generally considered the architect of the Common Core national standards—will continue to develop similar frameworks for its 33 other Advanced Placement (AP) courses and thus become an unelected de facto legislature for the nation’s public and private high schools.

Ignoring Cultural Giants
The framework also sidesteps any discussion of the personalities and achievements of American giants whose courage and conviction helped build the United States. It excises Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, and the other founders from the nation’s story. George Washington’s historical contributions are reduced to a brief sentence fragment noting his farewell address. Two pages later, the framework grants teachers the flexibility to discuss the architecture of Spanish missions, suggesting it merits more attention than the heroes of 1776.

The framework consistently emphasizes negative events while ignoring positive achievements. For example, although it does not mention the sacrifices U.S. civilians and armed forces made to defeat fascism, it does recommend teachers focus on “wartime experiences, such as the internment of Japanese Americans, challenges to civil liberties, debates over race and segregation, and the decision to drop the atomic bomb [which] raised questions about American values.”

The units on colonial America focus unbalanced attention on the conflicts between the colonists and Native Americans. Students will learn about the Beaver Wars, Chickasaw Wars, and King Philip’s War, but they will learn little or nothing about the rise of religious toleration, the development of democratic institutions, and the emergence of a society that included a rich mix of ethnic groups.

A particularly troubling failure of the framework is its dismissal of the Declaration of Independence and the principles so eloquently expressed there.

The framework’s entire discussion of this seminal document consists of just one phrase in one sentence: “The colonists’ belief in the superiority of republican self-government based on the natural rights of the people found its clearest American expression in Thomas Paine’s Common Sense and in the Declaration of Independence.” The framework thus ignores the philosophical underpinnings of the Declaration and the willingness of the signers to pledge “our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor” to the cause of freedom.

Frowning at American History
The new framework inculcates a consistently negative view of the nation’s past. For example, the units on colonial America stress the development of a “rigid racial hierarchy” and a “strong belief in British racial and cultural superiority.” The framework ignores the United States’ founding principles and their influence in inspiring the spread of democracy and galvanizing the movement to abolish slavery.

The framework continues this theme by reinterpretting Manifest Destiny. Instead of a belief that America has a mission to spread democracy and new technologies across the continent, the framework teaches the nation “was built on a belief in white racial superiority and a sense of American cultural superiority.”

The AP U.S. History Framework is not a fait accompli. There is still time for parents, educators, and public officials to scrutinize it closely and then demand a new curriculum that does not trump state curriculum requirements with warmed-over political correctness.

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LEARN MORE
Larry Krieger’s in-depth analysis of the changes to AP U.S. History: http://heartland.org/policy-documents/analysis-college-board-ap-us-history-framework
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