By Ashley Bateman
Starting next fall, Louisiana will contract with local individuals, businesses, and nonprofits to offer K-12 students academic courses, training, and apprenticeships beyond the classroom in an effort to support innovation and entrepreneurship.

Big names like Sylvan Learning and the Princeton Review are vying for selection to the Course Choice program, alongside individuals and smaller start-up companies.

“This Course Choice was so under the radar,” said James Gilmore, founder of Bayard Management Group, LLC (BMG). His company applied to offer internships and business classes such as ethics and communication. “It’s so sad that in all of the fight between teachers and tenure and all of the headline news, no one was talking about this great, innovative program.”

JAMES GILMORE, FOUNDER
BAYARD MANAGEMENT GROUP, LLC

Louisiana Creates a Market for K-12 Classes

By Rachel Sheffield

Texas Parents’ demand for school choice is “overwhelming” and continues to grow even as their options expand, says Matthew Barnes. As executive director of the Houston-based Families Empowered, Barnes spends his days helping thousands of families find the best school fit for their children among private, charter, and district options. “It’s really a function of every parent wanting to have the best opportunity for their child,” he said, though Families Empowered surveys indicate many parents don’t know about their options. Many more families want options than have them. The waiting list for Texas charter schools tops 101,000 students, says David Dunn, executive direc-

TExAS, p. 6

‘Won’t Back Down’
Page 17

Trust Busting
Research and experience show that breaking the government monopoly is essential in improving education, writes Herb Walberg.
Page 18

Texas Families Show ‘Overwhelming’ Demand for School Choice

By Ashley Bateman
Louisiana, p. 8
Get Involved!

National School Choice Week is your chance to shine.

Show your support for school choice by participating in National School Choice Week 2013 (January 27 - February 2, 2013). Recognized by the media as the “largest celebration of education reform in U.S. history,” National School Choice Week gives you the opportunity to earn positive media coverage and to advance the cause of educational opportunity for millions of children nationwide. Anyone can plan or attend an event.

Here are just a few ideas:
- Plan or attend a special event
- Hold a press conference
- Write an opinion piece or letter to the editor
- Join our “I support school choice” placard campaign
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Learn more at www.schoolchoiceweek.com

In 2013, help us break National School Choice Week’s 2012 records:

- 400+ total events, held in all 50 states
- Governors or legislatures of 28 States & territories officially recognized School Choice Week
- 1000+ positive news stories reached 47 million Americans
- 340+ organizations joined the coalition
Texas Plans to Be 40th State to Seek Waiver from No Child Left Behind

By Sarah McIntosh

Texas wants the federal government to release it from education policies originating with the state’s former governor. The state’s new education commissioner said he will request a No Child Left Behind waiver.

In July, Washington and Wisconsin were granted federal waivers of the 2002 law, making a total of 33 states now subject to federal oversight of plans they were required to submit to satisfy waiver conditions imposed by the U.S. Department of Education.

“The timing was right to apply,” said Debbie Ratcliffe, director of communications for the Texas Education Agency. “Texas is currently in the process of developing a new state accountability system. Having both a federal and a state system would be a burden to our schools. The Texas system by far surpasses the federal system, and our districts and campuses are better served by having one strong system. We need less redundancy and more focus on improving student achievement.”

Michael Williams, the state’s new commissioner, made the announcement in September, the first after his appointment.

The state took public comment on its plan through September 27. It intends to submit its application in January or February rather than its usual Adequate Yearly Progress report, Ratcliffe said.

NCLB was due for reauthorization in 2007, but so far only the Republican-controlled House of Representatives has managed to pass any related legislation, which has stalled in the Democrat-controlled Senate. Former President George W. Bush proposed NCLB, and it has mostly led to a sprawling set of mandates, requirements, and bureaucracies, which have created enormous problems.”

The waiver would give the state more control over its accountability system and how it treats failing schools in return for enacting certain policies the Obama administration requires, “and in theory it will be monitored by the Department of Education,” Hess said.

“Sprawling Set of Mandates”

Texas schools, like most across the country, have struggled to meet federal requirements, with 70 percent of its school districts labeled “failing” under last year’s NCLB benchmarks. The law requires states to educate nearly all students to “proficient” levels on standardized tests.

“Texas’s decision to apply for a waiver is not really surprising. NCLB is so onerous it forces states to label so many schools as failing that states are trying to find some leeway,” said Rick Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute. “NCLB was the last piece of Great Society legislation enacted. All of the good intentions and uneven design characteristics of any Great Society legislation is present in NCLB. It has mostly led to a sprawling set of mandates, requirements, and bureaucracies, which have created enormous problems.”

Meddling, or Oversight?

The multiplication of federal overseers and accountability mechanisms will reduce benefits to poor and minority children, who benefited from the decades of accountability-focused reforms that culminated in NCLB, says Sandy Kress, an attorney who helped write the law.

He puts states requesting waivers into two groups: those that “want out of accountability” and those that want “more integrated accountability.”

“The bureaucracies and the unions are tired of being pressed to keep improving education for disadvantaged students. They don’t like choice. They don’t like efficiency. And they don’t like the pressure of accountability,” he said.

Waiting for Details

Kress said Texas likely falls into the group that wants more integrated accountability, but that won’t be evident until its waiver application is published. “The feds have done a terrible job administratively of implementing NCLB, and the law has language that ought to be clarified and fixed,” he said. “The feds shouldn’t micromanage states on education. But so long as they’re spending our tax dollars, they ought to expect accountability for the money. That’s about all they ought to do.”

Texas has seen a variety of education reform proposals in recent months, most notably with the lieutenant governor publicly announcing he will work to help pass voucher legislation in the next session.

“Texas already has a lot of top-down accountability with its new testing system, which was first used this year,” said James Golson, an education analyst for the Texas Public Policy Foundation. “What the state needs is bottom-up accountability. Parents need to be empowered and given greater flexibility and choice in education for their children.”

JAMES GOLSON, EDUCATION ANALYST

TEXAS PUBLIC POLICY FOUNDATION

By sarah McIntosh

McIntosh (mcintosh.sarah@gmail.com) is vice president at Missouri News Horizon and a lecturer at Wichita State University.
The basic problem is that schools don’t teach the science. They do behavior modification."

MICHAEL SANERA, AUTHOR, FACTS, NOT FEAR: Teaching Children About the Environment

By Joy Pullmann

The National Science Foundation has awarded $33 million over the next five years to six organizations that promise to promote alarmism about climate change in schools and communities. The grants, ranging from $4.9 million to $5.9 million each, focus on classroom instruction and outreach through museums, aquariums, and nature centers. The grant proposals target a wide array of people, including elected officials, students in grades 8 to 12, and “Key Influentials being trained as knowledgeable messengers to deliver locally-relevant information” in San Diego.

“The focus is on how best to spread the scare,” said David Wojick, director of the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math Education Center. “Each grant goes to a network, which is then supposed to clone itself and grow.”

One initiative aims to create a “national model for comprehensive climate change education,” while another proposes to “develop a resilient and replicable national infrastructure for reaching ... public audiences.” Another boasts its team has experts in decision science, the study of how people make decisions, widely used in marketing.

“The basic problem is that schools don’t teach the science,” said Michael Sanera, author of Facts, Not Fear: Teaching Children About the Environment. Instead, he said, “They do behavior modification. National education meetings have regular panel discussions on how to use sophisticated behavior modification on kids without the parents knowing it. They want to make kids not be critical thinkers about science but to basically do certain things they consider environmentally correct without good, hard evidence and examination of the pros and cons of various points of view.”

Despite such efforts, just 38 percent of Americans believe human activity is causing global warming, according to the Pew Research Center.

Science of Propaganda

Grant recipients told Education Week they intend to shift away from controversy and toward the “consensus” that human activities have created global warming that threatens catastrophe.

“That there is no scientific controversy is a lie,” Wojick said. “The government spreading a lie to further its policies is the very definition of propaganda. Hence this is propaganda on a massive scale. NSF is turning propaganda into a science.”

“The bias of the teaching of climate change and/or global warming is profound,” said Tim Ball, an environmental consultant and retired University of Winnipeg climatology professor.

Big Spending on Advocacy

NSF is a federal agency that devotes most of its $7 billion annual budget to grants. It has a long history of spending millions to promote the alarmist interpretation of the global warming debate, said James M. Taylor, a Heartland Institute senior fellow in environmental studies.

“It looks like NSF is paying for orchestrated attempts at political influence,” Wojick said. “This has nothing to do with education.”

NSF is not the only global warming tax spender. The World Wildlife Fund spent $68.5 million on “public education” last year, according to the Wall Street Journal, and 18 percent of its operating fund came from taxpayer grants and contracts. The Natural Resources Defense Council raised $95.4 million in 2011, according to the WSJ, 1 percent of which came from taxpayers.

Confusion for Teachers, Students

Federal agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency, NASA, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration also have released alarmist, misleading, and erroneous educational materials, said Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom.

“Climate change is a scientific issue, but it’s almost always in the social science curriculum of the schools,” Ball said. “That means it is taught basically in scientific ignorance, and automatically becomes a political and emotional issue rather than ‘What are the facts here?’”

Teachers are often too busy and inundated with material to sift through the climate change debate themselves, Ball said. Teacher training and textbooks team with inaccurate, biased information, Sanera said.

“You find true believers who will try to browbeat the schools, tell them they’re giving in to mystics or deniers,” McCluskey said. “The reality is most people aren’t going to touch this, no matter what these guys say, even if they have a strong opinion, ... because they don’t want to get into big conflicts. A lot of people don’t buy these ‘The world’s going to end unless we destroy the economy’ sort of arguments.”

Sneaking Into Schools

McCluskey has studied California’s environmental education requirements and says most education leaders would rather not follow suit, given the controversy. That may change if Common Core science standards go nationwide, he said. The Common Core promotes concern over global warming and attributes it to human activity. Its math and language arts standards have been adopted in 46 states under pressure from the Obama administration.

“It’s absolutely amazing how little people know of what goes on,” Ball said. “People don’t realize how vulnerable our society is through its school system.”

The trend is to push politicized science education on younger children, Sanera said, when they are “more impressionable” and unable to understand much about how the science works.

“These kids are being frightened about the environment,” Ball said, relating an incident of children crying at a birthday party because they feared a popped helium balloon would expand the ozone hole. “Putting that kind of a problem on those small shoulders is criminal.”

Joy Pullmann ([pullmann@heartland.org](mailto:pullmann@heartland.org)) is a research fellow of The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
70% of U.S. Voters Support Parent Trigger Laws

By Vicki Alger

Two national polls both found 70 percent of U.S. voters support Parent Trigger laws, which give parents the power to petition for improvements at their children's failing schools.

“Parent Trigger adds to the education reform dialogue the voice of parents in choosing what is best for their children,” said Myles Mendoza, a Democrats for Education Reform senior partner. “Too often parents have little power in the debate.”

In January 2010, California became the first state to enact Parent Trigger legislation. If more than 50 percent of parents whose children attend a failing school sign a petition, school officials must implement the reform requested by those parents: closure of the school and reassignment of its students to other public schools; conversion of the school into a charter school; or turn-around/transformation, in which most school staff are replaced.

A national poll commissioned by StudentsFirst found 70 percent of likely U.S. voters support the law. Those results were identical to those in the 2012 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll.

“The bottom line here is parents would rather have more options with their children’s schooling than what they have right now.”

Ben Boychuk, Policy Advisor
The Heartland Institute

“Though we were surprised to see that 70 percent of Americans favor Parent Trigger laws, we recognize that the words ‘failing schools’ incite action,” said Bill Bushaw, PDK executive director and poll co-director. “We believe that this response shows that Americans clearly understand the importance of providing each child in our country with a high-quality education, although ideally, we hope people would become involved with their local school and take positive action long before the school is labeled ‘failing.’”

Strong Bipartisan Support

In both surveys, support for the Parent Trigger was solidly bipartisan.

“While special interests get a lot of attention, they don’t represent the majority view,” said Michelle Rhee, CEO of StudentsFirst and former chancellor of the Washington, DC public school system, in a statement. “What parents actually support are common-sense solutions, such as Parent Trigger laws, than can help hold schools accountable and ensure all kids are getting a great education.”

Of the likely voters responding in the PDK/Gallup Poll that they favor such laws, 76 percent of Republicans did, followed by 75 percent of independents and 61 percent of Democrats. Seventy-six percent of parents with students in public schools favor Parent Trigger laws.

Among likely voters responding in the StudentsFirst poll, 78 percent of Republicans favor Parent Trigger laws, along with 68 percent of independents and 65 percent of Democrats.

Support for Parent Trigger laws also transcended race differences, with 70 percent support from Caucasian voters, 68 percent support from African-American voters, and 70 percent support from Hispanic voters.

Results for Parents

To date, 20 states have considered Parent Trigger legislation, and six states besides California have adopted it: Connecticut, Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, Ohio, and Texas.

“The controversy surrounding the Parent Trigger is in some respects manufactured,” said Ben Boychuk, an education policy advisor at The Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News. “You find teachers unions and union-allied groups making specious arguments. “The bottom line here is parents would rather have more options with their children’s schooling than what they have right now,” Boychuk added. “And the important thing to understand about the Parent Trigger is it represents a means for parents to get results they might not get otherwise.”

Vicki Alger, Ph.D. (heartlander@vicki-alger.com) is a senior fellow at the Independent Women’s Forum.
Indiana Voucher Enrollment Doubles in Second Year

By Rachel Sheffield

The number of Indiana children attending private school on a state voucher has more than doubled over the program’s initial enrollment, according to the Indiana Department of Education.

In 2011–12, 3,919 students enrolled in the program. For this fall and the 2012–13 school year, more than 9,000 enrolled. In the first two years of the program, 2011–12 and the current school year, the number of scholarships is limited to 7,500 and 15,000 students, respectively. Next year the cap will be lifted.

“Last year … it was the largest first-year voucher program in the nation’s history,” said Alex Damron, press secretary for the Indiana Department of Education.

When school options were discussed, 18 percent did not identify the current school. Why parents Want Choice

A recent Families Empowered survey found a variety of reasons families were not satisfied with their current school and wanted another. The most common was poor academic quality, at 37.2 percent. Others cited problems with school personnel (14.8 percent) and security, safety, or discipline problems (10.4 percent). Nearly 18 percent did not identify a specific reason for wanting to leave their current school.

“They know there’s something better,” Barnes noted.

Families Empowered helps families navigate school options to help kids stay college-bound, using three main strategies, Barnes said: finding a good school fit, helping parents learn to advocate for their education needs, and teaching families to support education at home.

“Demand continues to far outpace supply,” Dunn said.

Private Vouchers Available

Private organizations—such as the Children’s Scholarship Fund-Fort Worth—provide K-12 scholarships in Texas. They too have seen significant school choice demand.

In its first round of awards, in 1999, CSF-FW granted approximately 500 private school scholarships to low-income families, though many more than 9,000 applied, said executive director Patty Myers. The organization maintains a waiting list of more than 1,000 families for a potential round of need-based scholarships.

CSF-FW continues to offer merit scholarships, awarding 100 in 2011. “We ask the children to work toward exemplary behavior,” Meyers said. Recipients must commit to finishing homework, attending class on time, and maintaining high grades. Meyer says she has been amazed at scholarship students’ quality. Although CSF-FW is small, she said, “somehow [parents] seem to find us.”

CSF-FW’s parent charity has awarded more than $4 million to more than 3,400 kids since 1993.

“If parents learn of their options, there will be a tidal wave of parents pursuing the best option for their child,” Barnes said.

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

Texas Families Show ‘Overwhelming’ Demand for School Choice Options

Continued from page 1

The number of Texas children attending private school on a state funding, or $5,400 a year, toward sending their children to the school of their choice.

Why Parents Want Choice

Texas offers no private school choice, but Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst announced in August he would work with state legislators to introduce voucher legislation.

That same month the state’s Senate Education Committee held a hearing to discuss Taxpayer Savings Grants—a voucher that would give families up to 60 percent of state per-pupil education funding, or $5,400 a year, toward sending their children to the school of their choice.

By Rachel Sheffield

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PODCAST INFO
Denver Retracts Controversial Teacher Evaluations

By Ashley Bateman

Following public outcry over requiring teachers to make students “question the dominant culture” and “work for social justice” to receive the highest rating possible on its teacher evaluations, Denver public schools has rewritten the language.

It now specifies that a “distinguished” teacher “encourages students to think critically about equity and bias in society, and to understand and question historic and prevailing currents of thought as well as dissenting and diverse viewpoints” and “cultivates students’ ability to understand and question historical and prevailing currents of thought and expressing dissenting and diverse viewpoints in respectful ways.”

“They might eliminate terms like ‘social justice,’ but I don’t think they have any intention to eliminate the idea,” said Terry Stoops, the John Locke Foundation’s director of education studies.

The controversial language required top teachers to meet “cultural competency indicators,” including encouraging students to “take social action to change/improve society or work for social justice.” Such a teacher’s students were previously required to “appear comfortable challenging the dominant culture in respectful ways.”

“You’re going to have a contingent of teachers who don’t believe in leftist ideology who are now forced to be evaluated on something they don’t believe in and something that they oppose,” Stoops said.

Seventy-six percent of teachers disagreed with the original rubric, according to a member survey by the Professional Association of Colorado Educators, a non-union teachers association.

‘Green Light’ for Liberal Activism

A concerned teacher alerted Denver’s Independence Institute to the modified criteria.

“This is a green light for the liberal teachers in DPS to go ahead and promote their liberal views,” said Pam Benigno, the institute’s education policy director.

“For the school district to promote an agenda using a teacher evaluation system is clearly an abuse of power.”

DPS refused to answer School Reform News inquiries about the origin of the new language.

“It sounds to me as though this has other come through contract negotiations from the union or it could have come from an activist board,” said Jon Fennell, director of teacher education at Hillsdale College.

The irony is unions have been almost vehemently against evaluations over the past decades.”

Preference for Subjective Evaluations

While similar activist terminology is not present in many K-12 teacher evaluations, Fennell said, similar ideology is often assigned reading in schools of education.

“There’s a lot of subjectivity involved in evaluating teachers and that’s by design, because those who don’t like these kinds of instruments will typically force states...to do teacher evaluations to have as much subjectivity as possible,” Stoops said.

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

Citing Chicago Strike, Ill. Lawmakers Propose Statewide School Choice

By Joy Pullmann

Citing the abysmal quality of Chicago’s public schools and the September teachers strike there, four Illinois legislators announced their support for legislation to remove the state’s cap on charter schools and create school vouchers.

“If Chicago teachers’ true concern was educating children, then they would still be in the classrooms, not in the picket lines,” said state Rep. Joe Sosnowski (R-Belvidere).

He continued, “[The Chicago Teachers Union’s] decision to fight for huge raises is indicative of them being out of touch with what average Americans are dealing with in these tough economic times. This current situation highlights why we need to empower parents to choose an education for their children, whether that be public, charter, or private schools.”

Approximately 26,000 CTU members went on strike for seven school days, leaving the city’s 350,000 non-charter students and their parents scrambling for care. Union members cited various reasons for the strike, primarily objecting to basing one-quarter of teacher evaluations on student test score progress and to allowing principals to pick any teachers for open positions rather than only laid-off union members.

The union also objects to the increasing number of charter schools in the city. Charter schools are fully public schools but run independently and are largely nonunionized. They remained open during the strike. Approximately 19,000 Chicago students are on charter school wait lists, according to Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel.

The current charter school cap is 120, with 75 allowed in Chicago and 45 statewide, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Chicago public schools have a 54 percent graduation rate. Chicago charter schools have a 76 percent graduation rate, close to the national average.

Charters Open, Improving Education

“Charters are open and serving students while district schools are mired in strikes and bureaucracy,” noted Bruno Behrend, policy advisor to the Chicago-based Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News.

“This alone is reason to rapidly expand charter schools and other choices, such as vouchers, through mechanisms like the Parent Trigger.”

Behrend joined Sosnowski, state Rep. Tom Morrison (R-Palatine), state Sen. Kyle McCarter (R-Libanon), and state Sen. Ron Sandack (R-Downers Grove), as well as representatives from the Illinois Policy Institute, at a press conference September 14. Palatine and Downers Grove are Chicago suburbs.

“In the midst of a Chicago Teachers Union strike, hundreds of thousands of children are being displaced amongst their peers, while those in charter and private schools are advancing daily in their educations.”

KYLE MCCARTER
STATE SENATOR
LEBANON, ILLINOIS

“This current situation highlights why we need to empower parents to choose an education for their children, whether that be public, charter, or private schools.”

JOE SOSNOWSKI
STATE REPRESENTATIVE
BELVIDERE, ILLINOIS

“Charters open, improving education...”

“In the midst of a Chicago Teachers Union strike, hundreds of thousands of children are being displaced amongst their peers, while those in charter and private schools are advancing daily in their educations.”

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is a research fellow of The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
between July 17, when the state’s Department of Education requested applications, and October 12, when the department closed the application window.

“The main hope is to give more students the opportunity to be prepared for attaining a college degree or career after high school,” said Barry Landry, a DOE press secretary.

A Look at the Offerings

Providers offering apprenticeship programs and dual enrollment make up a smaller number of applicants than wholly online providers. BMG wants to offer online, face-to-face, and hybrid courses with an emphasis on apprenticeship and internships.

“When you marry education and experience, you get a more-equipped and more-aware citizen or youth,” Gilmore said.

Gilmore interned in Washington, DC when young, and he has noted gaps in human capital development between youth and working adults. One of the company’s strengths, he says, is his decade-long experience placing professionals in various positions and writing career plans for teens.

“The goal is for every child to go to college, but also to ensure that every one of them is prepared,” Gilmore said. “We can’t set that expectation if we’re not preparing them.”

Another applicant, Apex Learning, is a well-known purveyor of standards-based digital curriculum.

“One of the challenges of any classroom is that each student is starting at a different point and has a unique set of needs,” said Teri Citterman, an Apex Learning spokeswoman. “Apex Learning online courses provide direct instruction and formative and summative assessment, allowing each student to move at his or her own pace, spending as much or as little time as needed to master the material. The classroom teacher is able to engage one on one with each student, using real-time data to monitor student progress and performance and determine the best way to help each student achieve.”

Apex credits its courses with graduation rate increases in multiple districts, including Boston, and decreases in dropout rates in Denver.

Funding Follows the Student

The Course Choice program includes two classifications of students: “eligible funded” and “eligible participating.”

Funded students are those attending a school the state rated C, D, or F. They can enroll on the taxpayers’ dime for any class they qualify for, Landry said. Participating students are those attending A or B schools; they must pay tuition unless their school does not offer the course they want to take.

Providers can charge for each class up to 15 percent of Louisiana’s education funding formula, the Minimum Foundation Program. MFP varies depending on where the student lives, but it averages approximately $10,900. Providers will receive 50 percent of the tuition from the state when the course starts and the second 50 percent when the student successfully completes it.

Getting Approved

Eleven potential providers listed face-to-face instruction in their applications, nearly 20 offered online courses, and nine offered hybrid instruction (a combination of online and in-person).

Twelve of the current applicants offered Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses, and several include industry certifications and technical training.

As this issue of School Reform News went to press, no applicants had yet been approved, Landry said. They must undergo “a rigorous interview process,” and the department will then recommend applicants to the state board of education, which will consider the list at its December meeting.

“Every year we’ll open up the program to hopefully offer more innovative programs and courses aimed at getting students more college- and career-ready,” Landry said.

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
Higher Test Scores of Voucher Students in Milwaukee Confirmed

By Rachel Sheffield

A new study indicates students in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program—the nation’s longest-running voucher plan—made greater test score gains than their Milwaukee Public Schools peers over five years.

The study, directed by the Legislative Audit Bureau (LAB), revealed both seventh- and tenth-grade choice students outperformed their peers in reading between 2006 and 2011.

“The latest review of data confirms an earlier finding of positive growth in the MPCP over students in MPS,” said Jim Bender, president of Milwaukee Parents for School Choice. “While they applied different methodology to the same data, the LAB found gains for MPCP students over those in Milwaukee Public Schools, continuing the upward trends.”

‘Strong Validation’ of Success

Since 2006, schools participating in MPCP have been legally required to report the scores of all standardized tests to the School Choice Demonstration Project, a group of education researchers at the University of Arkansas. The law also required the LAB “to review and analyze the test score data.”

“Generally, when follow-up researchers use different methods but confirm the original results of a research project, as happened in this case, that is strong validation of the original research team and its findings,” said Patrick Wolf, an SCDP researcher.

The new, higher gains among Milwaukee choice students may be partly due to “a new high-stakes testing policy,” Wolf said.

“When both MPCP and MPS students were taking the same state-mandated test, but the testing was low-stakes for the private schools but high-stakes for the public schools, the two sectors performed similarly. When both groups took the same test with the same high stakes of public reporting, the students in the choice program outperformed their matched counterparts in the public schools,” he said.

Diverse Kids, Diverse Schools

There are likely many reasons that together explain why students in MPCP did better, Wolf said. “A more disciplined school environment that facilitates concentration and therefore learning, a better reading curriculum, more homework, better teachers, a more caring and supportive school environment, more reading instructional time—it really could be any one of these or several of them in combination,” he said.

School choice lets families find the school that best fits their children’s needs, said Christian D’Andrea, an education policy analyst at the Wisconsin-based MacIver Institute.

“Milwaukee’s children are a very dynamic group, and they need a school system that is evolving as quickly as they are. While traditional schools still provide quality educational options for some, they no longer can fit a growing student base under a one-size-fits-all educational umbrella,” D’Andrea said.

Beyond test score gains, Wolf cites previous research demonstrating other positive outcomes for Milwaukee choice students, including increased high school graduation rates and college enrollment.

While test scores help measure schools, graduation rates better predict students’ future success, Bender said.

“Combined, these results show the MPCP program has a broad, positive effect on students,” he said.

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PATRICK WOLF, RESEARCHER SCHOOL CHOICE DEMONSTRATION PROJECT UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

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Since 2006, schools participating in MPCP have been legally required to report the scores of all standardized tests to the School Choice Demonstration Project, a group of education researchers at the University of Arkansas. The law also required the LAB “to review and analyze the test score data.”

“Generally, when follow-up researchers use different methods but confirm the original results of a research project, as happened in this case, that is strong validation of the original research team and its findings,” said Patrick Wolf, an SCDP researcher.

The new, higher gains among Milwaukee choice students may be partly due to “a new high-stakes testing policy,” Wolf said.

“When both MPCP and MPS students were taking the same state-mandated test, but the testing was low-stakes for the private schools but high-stakes for the public schools, the two sectors performed similarly. When both groups took the same test with the same high stakes of public reporting, the students in the choice program outperformed their matched counterparts in the public schools,” he said.

Diverse Kids, Diverse Schools

There are likely many reasons that together explain why students in MPCP did better, Wolf said. “A more disciplined school environment that facilitates concentration and therefore learning, a better reading curriculum, more homework, better teachers, a more caring and supportive school environment, more reading instructional time—it really could be any one of these or several of them in combination,” he said.

School choice lets families find the school that best fits their children’s needs, said Christian D’Andrea, an education policy analyst at the Wisconsin-based MacIver Institute.

“Milwaukee’s children are a very dynamic group, and they need a school system that is evolving as quickly as they are. While traditional schools still provide quality educational options for some, they no longer can fit a growing student base under a one-size-fits-all educational umbrella,” D’Andrea said.

Beyond test score gains, Wolf cites previous research demonstrating other positive outcomes for Milwaukee choice students, including increased high school graduation rates and college enrollment.

While test scores help measure schools, graduation rates better predict students’ future success, Bender said. “Combined, these results show the MPCP program has a broad, positive effect on students,” he said.

Rachel Sheffield (rachel.sheffield@heritage.org) is an education research assistant at The Heritage Foundation.
Focus on Students Keeps Utah School Spending Low

By Mary Petrides Tillotson

Utah is home to seven of the 10 lowest-spending school districts in the country, according to a recent study by efficiency research nonprofit Govistics.

Those seven districts spend less than $8,000 per student per year, compared with the $29,409 annual per-pupil spending in Washington, DC, which was ranked the highest-spending district.

State and school district representatives cited low administrative costs, strong families, and a classroom focus as central contributors to Utah’s financial and academic successes.

Demographic Benefits
Utah’s demographics put the state in a unique situation: 20 percent of Utahns are public school students, said Mark Peterson, a spokesman for the Utah State Office of Education. Per capita or per taxable household, Utah has lots of kids.

As a consequence, the state has the largest pupil-teacher ratio in the country at 23 students per teacher.

“We do tend to have higher class sizes, but we have very dedicated teachers and we have strong parental support, so we tend to get a lot more volunteers assisting in our classrooms,” said Ben Horsley, spokesman for Granite School District.

The state’s average teacher salary is relatively low. Peterson attributes this partly to lower-than-average salaries across the state and partly to the number of women teachers who leave the field within five years to raise families. The average salary in Utah is $40,950, compared to the U.S. average at $45,230.

Nebo School District hired 270 teachers this year, said Lana Hiskey, its public relations director. Some were new positions, she said, but much was turnover. Starting salary in the district is $31,512.

Core Curriculum Focus
Washington County School District, one of the seven, aims for a tight core curriculum, said business administrator Brent Bills.

“We do put our money, it’s directed in the classroom—it’s toward literacy, math, and science,” he said.

The district has few electives such as art and music in elementary schools, he said. Some schools offer a choir program during “zero hour” before school. The director receives a small stipend instead of a teacher’s salary.

A team of 14 oversees finances for Washington schools, where just over 27,000 students are enrolled.

“We really do keep our overhead as low as we possibly can. If a body’s not required, then we don’t have that body... to make sure we’re spending the money inside the classroom,” Bills said.

Over the past three years, Granite schools managed $58 million in cuts.

“We focused the cuts to make sure they impacted the classrooms least of all,” Horsley said.

Low Admin Costs
Less than half a percent of Granite schools’ budget goes toward administration, which he said was “probably similar” to other Utah districts.

“First priority is always student learning,” said Tim Leffel, finance director for Davis School District. “If we see a need or a shortfall in the achievement gap, we’ll focus our resources there.”

Second priority, he said, is caring for employees, including joining teachers in contributing to their retirement plans.

Giving kids good instruction the first time is a priority in Washington, Bills said. Teachers give frequent tests to assess student knowledge and try to patch holes early. This minimizes costly intervention.

“We have to concentrate more on catching them the first time around, then being very careful about how we spend our dollars in those areas to make sure the [remediation efforts] we’re offering are very effective,” he said.

Bringing students back up to speed is a “very expensive way of teaching,” he said.

Strong Families, Smart Buildings
Strong families are key in helping students succeed, Bills and Horsley both said. Davis’s parent volunteers save schools money, Leffel noted.

“Usually, both parents are educated, at least up through bachelor’s degree, in our area,” Hiskey said. “Students are living in homes where they deem education as important.”

That focus extends beyond the family, she said. Four large universities and several community colleges reside within an hour and a half of the district.

While Nebo is large, with about 30,000 students this year and adding an average of 700 each year, each of its seven major communities is a small town.

“Honestly, the recreation and activities and things that families do are based around our schools. Almost all of my nights are taken up with school activities, and not because of my job, necessarily. It’s because of my own children,” she said.

Even the school buildings help conserve costs in Washington, Bills said. The ground-source heating and cooling system pumps fluid 200 feet into the ground and back up, using the Earth’s year-round stable temperature at that level to heat and cool the building, instead of costly electricity.

“We’ve been able to dramatically reduce our heating and cooling costs,” Bills said.

Nation’s ‘Most Efficient’
Lower costs have not reduced Utah’s education quality. Utah ACT scores, which indicate college readiness, have held within a few points of the national average over the past five years.

On Advanced Placement exams, 20.7 percent of Utah students, compared with 18.1 percent of students nationwide, scored a 3 or higher.

“Utah is one of the most efficient school systems in the country, if not the most efficient,” Peterson wrote. “This we attribute to the hard work of dedicated classroom teachers, their assistants, and administrators.”

Mary Petrides Tillotson (mary.c.tillotson@gmail.com), a former Michigan reporter, now writes from Front Royal, Virginia.
Missouri Passes Law Allowing More Charter Schools

By Vicki Alger

Gov. Jay Nixon (D) has signed Missouri’s first major piece of charter school legislation since 1998: Senate Bill 576 will allow charter schools to open statewide and make it easier to close poor-performing ones.

“The law will make sure there is transparency and openness and will give students a better chance at succeeding,” said state Rep. Tishaura Jones (D-St. Louis City).

Missouri previously allowed charter schools only in academically struggling St. Louis and Kansas City. Those schools enroll 20,000 students. The new law, which went into effect in late August, allows freestanding charter schools to open in unaccredited school districts or those that have been provisionally accredited for up to three years. It also would allow district-sponsored charter schools statewide.

“It is important that all of Missouri’s families have an opportunity to choose the public educational option best for their children,” said Douglas Thaman, executive director of the Missouri Public Charter Schools Association.

In his January state of the state address, the governor called on the legislature to pass a charter school accountability bill.

“S.B. 576 is a step in the right direction,” said Audrey Spalding, a policy analyst with the Show-Me Institute. She said the state should consider allowing charters to open in every school district without local school board approval to create a more innovative education climate.

High Bar for Performance

Now more Missouri universities and colleges and a new Missouri Charter Public School Commission can sponsor charter schools under the same quality requirements. Similar commissions exist in other states to help meet the high demand for charter schools and ensure high-quality charters can open.

“The purpose of charter schools [is] to identify and reward schools that help students, while closing down schools that consistently fail students,” Spalding said. “If only we held our traditional public schools as accountable.”

Charter schools must sign performance contracts with their sponsors and will be evaluated every three years by the State Board of Education or any time for cause. The board must approve new sponsors individually.

“Missouri’s charter schools work tirelessly every day toward a high-quality public education for students from very diverse backgrounds,” Thaman said. “Missouri’s charter school community welcomes the increased autonomy for increased accountability bargain that is at the heart of the charter school model.”

Limits to Growth

Missouri’s charter school legislation is likely to expand the number of charter schools in the state, Spalding said, but not dramatically. Charters can now open in only 10 more of Missouri’s 522 districts.

“The large majority of Missouri students will not have the option of attending a charter school,” Spalding said.

The legislation aims to stop financial mismanagement in some St. Louis charters, but the increased paperwork required to open and operate new schools “may end up overburdening charter schools, making them less effective,” said Spalding.

Vouchers Boost College Enrollment for African-Americans

By Ashley Bateman

A new, “gold standard” study finds African-American students who receive a voucher for elementary education are 24 percent more likely to attend college.

Researchers Paul Peterson of Harvard University and Matthew Chingos of the Brookings Institution analyzed data gathered in the 1990s in New York City, when more than 20,000 elementary school children vied for School Choice Scholarships Foundation vouchers. A lottery determined 1,300 recipients who received half-tuition vouchers to their school of choice.

African-American voucher applicants and recipients were found more likely to enroll in college, whether they used the entire scholarship amount or not, reaffirming a plethora of studies pointing toward vouchers as a key aspect of education reform and student success.

Voucher Students Learn More

By matching voucher applicants’ Social Security numbers to National Student Clearinghouse college enrollment data, Peterson and Chingos determined a mere voucher offer increased the likelihood of college enrollment among African-Americans by 20 percent. If not offered a voucher, only 36 percent of black students attended college.

With a maximum cost of $1,400 per student per year and an average usage of 2.6 years, the benefits of the New York City vouchers far outweighed the cost, the researchers noted.

High Cost to Dropouts

Extensive research has demonstrated high school dropouts cost their neighbors and diminish their own quality of life.

“[Dropouts] tend to migrate to welfare programs, they wind up on public assistance, they have high rates of unemployment, and unfortunately they have higher rates of incarceration than people who attend good public schools and live in good neighborhoods, so this study isn’t really surprising,” said Susan Meyers, spokeswoman for the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

In Montana, researchers estimated the state gains $32,402 per individual who graduates and a great reduction in Medicaid spending. A 2010 study found African-American male high school dropouts in Oregon were five times more likely to be incarcerated than their graduating counterparts.

‘Winning Ticket’

A larger voucher program might have better effects because it might exert more pressure on public schools, Chingos said.

“When you give children and parents an opportunity to escape a failing environment … they have a chance to not only flourish but to graduate high school, attend college, and make something of their lives,” Meyers said. “That is a winning ticket for their lives, society, and taxpayers.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@gmail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
Nevada Needs an Update to School Funding Formula

By Ashley Bateman

Nevada’s school funding formula was last altered in 1967, and since then the state’s population has shifted so much the formula has become inequitable, according to a new report.

In a report presented to Nevada lawmakers in August, analysts at the American Institutes for Research recommend several actions to improve the state’s education funding formula. Those include adjusting for impoverished children and English language learners and clarifying special-needs student funding.

Nevada was primarily rural and homogeneous in 1967, but it is no longer, the study notes.

Clark County would receive a funding boost if the report recommendations are enacted, said Geoff Lawrence, the Nevada Policy Research Institute’s deputy policy director. The county, whose county seat is Las Vegas, comprises a majority of the state’s students and is the fifth largest U.S. school district.

“I don’t expect K-12 funding to grow in the next budget cycle,” Lawrence said.

Key Findings, Recommendations
Drawing on data from school districts across the country, the authors developed 13 recommendations, which focused on three areas: state K-12 education funding, special education, and general reforms.

“The most central drivers of cost are student needs, district size and remoteness, and the cost of hiring and retaining comparable staff across different labor markets,” said report coauthor Jesse Levin. “All three of these are going to affect the cost of providing a similar educational opportunity to students with different circumstances.”

The report suggests reexamining student enrollment to determine teacher allotments.

Though most states adjust funding for students in poverty and English language learners, Nevada does not. The report also found no relationship between how much a district spent per special education student and the percent of such students in the district.

Legislative Response
Though adjustments for low-income students, English learners, and special education garnered more press attention, the authors maintained all their recommendations are important.

Though Nevada’s Department of Education is reviewing the report’s findings, developing immediate legislative priorities is premature, said Deborah Cunningham, a DOE deputy superintendent.

“We will proceed to develop thoughtful responses to each of the recommendations, implementing those that we can under our own authority and proposing to the executive and legislature those that require their action,” Cunningham said.

Taking Action
The report was endorsed by its reviewing legislative panel and has been positively received by policymakers, but financial strain may make some recommendations difficult to enact this year, Cunningham said.

“We will certainly move to document the existing funding system, which was one of the first recommendations,” Cunningham said. “We will also seek advice from key education stakeholders.”

It is crucial that funding follows individual students, said Lisa Snell, director of education and child welfare for the Reason Foundation.

“Funding at the state level often washes out at the district level,” she said. “It just needs to be super-transparent.”

“We’re not here to dictate what policy should be, but we can definitely give a good picture of how each alternative funding adjustment scenario would play out across Nevada’s districts,” Levin said.

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@gmail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
‘Digital Tutor’ Adapts to Students

By Mary Petrides Tillotson

A newly developed digital tutor incorporates what education expert Michael Horn calls the “holy grail” of education technology: the ability to tailor itself to individual students as they use it.

It’s part of a wave of adaptive technology, says Horn, executive director of education at the Innosight Institute.

Education publishing giant McGraw-Hill distributes the program, called “LearnSmart,” as a separately purchased aid to more than 100 of its college textbooks.

“A lot of companies have emerged under the idea that if Netflix can help us find movies that we’d most like based on our prior preferences and Amazon can help us shop, we can figure out what’s most likely to help students learn best,” Horn said.

Students using LearnSmart answer multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank questions, noting their confidence in each answer. The program uses an algorithm to determine the next question, gearing students toward material they don’t know as well.

Students get a customized report of strengths and weaknesses, plus recommendations for specific material to study. LearnSmart costs $24.99 per course.

Efficient, Personalized

“It’s highly personalized. It lets students study in a way that is as efficient as possible. Making studying more efficient for students encourages them to study more, … and it more closely connects students to the learning process,” said Brian Belardi, director of media relations for McGraw-Hill. “They know at all times where they’re at.”

Frank Wray, a University of Cincinnati professor of biology, has been requiring his online students to use LearnSmart for several years.

“I find a very direct correlation between students who complete a [LearnSmart] module and how well they do in the class, so I think for the majority of students, it’s a real benefit to their learning,” he said.

Early Stages of Technology

Adaptive technology is in its early stages, Horn said, and teaching requires more data than predicting book and movie preferences.

“The technology has a super-exciting horizon and potential, but [it’s] very early in terms of collecting the amount of data we need ... and being able to better target learning objects for each student,” Horn said.

Adaptive technology will likely work better in more objective subjects and lower-level classes where students are building basic knowledge than in higher-level and discussion-heavy subjects, Horn said.

Belardi said K-12 LearnSmart programs are “nothing I can rule out.”

Utah High School Expands Student Options Dramatically

By Casey Harper

Innovations High School is breaking all the rules as it opens in Salt Lake City, Utah this fall. The public school runs year-round and allows students to take classes in the format, time, and pacing they choose.

Students may take classes in a traditional classroom at their assigned local high school or use a digital curriculum combined with access to teachers on campus for aid and accountability. Students also can select courses at a career and technology center or at South Lake Community College, both attached to the high school.

“What we’re doing here has never been done in the country,” said Innovations High Principal Kenneth Grover.

Grover says 62.1 percent of his district’s students are from families at or below the federal poverty level. Twenty-four percent of Utah students drop out of high school, according to the Utah Office of Education.

“Most people don’t talk about what we can do from the inside to make the changes to better meet the needs of kids,” Grover said. “We’re saying ‘Hey, own your school. Come to class every day and engage’ …”

Self-Directed Learning

Students must spend at least four hours a day in the school building, and they have access to any teacher all day.

“Because of family dynamics or jobs, some students are choosing to come early in the morning and leave by noon or come in at one and leave by six,” Grover said.

Students sign up for eight credits per year and take up to five classes at a time. The digital curriculum—a suite of classes called GradPoint, from a private vendor—allows parents and teachers to track students’ progress online.

“What better way to get accountability?”

Students are free to create social activities and clubs, and they may still compete on their assigned high school’s athletic teams. They may also take classes at their assigned high schools, such as choir or band.

Self Control, Cost Control

Judi Clark, executive director of Utah Parents for Choice in Education, dismisses critics’ claims that students are not mature enough to make such decisions about their education.

“Traditionally, people have underestimated students and their parents and how involved they want to be in their education,” she said.

Grover rejects the idea that breaking ground requires breaking the bank. Innovations received no extra grants or more funding than any public school in Utah, the state ranked last in the nation in per-pupil spending according to the 2010 U.S. Census, at approximately $6,700 per student.

“If I can pull it off here with the state of Utah funding, I can pull it off, guaranteed, in any state in the country,” he said.

Casey Harper (casey.harper33@gmail.com) writes from Hillsdale, Michigan.
By Ashley Bateman

As school districts across the country revitalize and redesign aging evaluation systems in an effort to improve teaching and net federal dollars, researchers have found that at least one district’s plan is improving student learning.

In their study, “Can Teacher Evaluation Improve Teaching?” researchers Eric Taylor and John Tyler found Cincinnati’s rigorous Teacher Evaluation System improves midcareer teachers’ performance, as reflected by student test scores.

By comparing teacher performance before 2000–01, when TES began, the authors found students gained an average of 4.5 percentile points in math and similarly in reading after teachers completed the year-long evaluation. They first noted the increase during the evaluation year, which is repeated four years later and then at five-year intervals.

As of summer 2011, 18 state legislatures had altered tenure or continuing contract policies, which rely heavily on evaluation determinations. Twelve states further amended such laws this year.

“There’s been tremendous legislative activity,” said Kathy Christie, chief of staff for the Education Commission of the States. “To get [Race to the Top] money a lot of the states had to change evaluations. Most of those are still in their infancy because they’re phasing in or developing the tools or putting together a task force to develop the rubrics.”

Peer Evaluators Drive Improvements

Peer evaluations comprise 75 percent of TES scoring. As opposed to the traditional “principal walk-through” evaluation many districts use, an administrator contributes only one-quarter of evaluation scores in Cincinnati.

The study found that while the system’s overall scores tend towards grade inflation, rubrics and feedback individual evaluators provided were less lenient, leading the authors to suggest, “Cincinnati’s evaluation program provides feedback on teaching skills that are associated with larger gains in student achievement.”

“Teachers have been notoriously afraid of getting principals who don’t know what they’re talking about in evaluating,” Christie said. “If they can, [districts] should crystallize the use of peers or independent evaluators.”

Although “peer evaluation is woven in quite a few” state policies, many of those tools are still under development, she said.

By Joy Pullmann

Statistical analyses of student scores can accurately rate teachers’ effectiveness in instruction, according to a new report published by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.

The report, by Marcus Winters, reviews a method of evaluating teachers called value-added modeling, which has sparked some controversy. VAM analyzes test scores as students progress through school to discover how a particular teacher contributes to or detracts from students’ progress.

“VAM is not a perfect measure of teacher quality because, like any statistical test, it is subject to random measurement errors. So it should not be regarded as the ‘magic bullet’ solution to the problem of evaluating teacher performance,” the report says. It continues, “However, the method is reliable enough to be part of a sensible policy of tenure reform—one that replaces ‘automatic’ tenure with rigorous evaluation of new candidates and periodic reexamination of those who have already received tenure.”

Winters notes current teacher tenure policies do little to remove poor teachers, who are associated with students’ higher rates of teen pregnancy, decreased chances of attending college, and reductions by as much as a grade level of learning from pupils in each school year.

“Transforming Tenure: Using Value-added Modeling to Identify Ineffective Teachers” analyzes data from Florida public schools and concludes a third-year teacher’s VAM score reliably predicts his or her fifth-year teaching success. Winters notes researchers have found similar results using data from North Carolina.

He also found, as research has shown previously, that having a master’s degree does not improve teachers’ performance, on average.

He evaluates the outcomes of different ways to use VAM in tenure policy, concluding that removing teachers who consistently perform poorly—each year for, perhaps, a period of three years—magnifies the possibility of too quickly removing teachers who have simply had a bad year or received an inaccurate assessment.

“VAM, when combined with other evaluation methods and well-designed policies, can and should be part of a reformed system that improves teacher quality and thus gives America’s public school pupils a better start in life,” he concludes.

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By Marcus Winters: Teachers Matter and How to Evaluate Them: http://news.heartland.org/podcasts/2012/06/20/marcus-winters-teachers-matter-and-how-evaluate-them

Podcast Info

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Winters then considers the implications of his findings for tenure reform. He recommends teachers be repeatedly evaluated to retain tenure, as teacher effectiveness may fade.

Policy Considerations

Winters then considers the implications of his findings for tenure reform. He recommends teachers be repeatedly evaluated to retain tenure, as teacher effectiveness may fade.

Costly, But Worth It?

Training evaluators is essential to productive outcomes, Christie said. In Cincinnati, evaluators undergo intensive training, but at a cost. The district spends $1.8 million to $2.1 million every year for TES, averaging $7,500 per evaluation.

According to Taylor and Tyler, student gains outweigh the spending, “since each peer evaluator evaluates 10 to 15 teachers, those gains are occurring in multiple teachers’ classrooms for a number of years.”

The authors also note that while many policymakers and researchers claim midcareer teachers cannot be improved, Cincinnati proves “experienced teachers provided with unusually detailed information on their performance improved substantially.”

“An important thing to note is that this is just one study,” Taylor said. “In general, in social science or general study we want to see replication. That’s an important step for the future.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
The Real Source of Soaring College Debt? Government

By Ashley Bateman

The federal government has released a report blaming private lenders and risky borrowers for the nation’s college debt spike, which hit a record high of $1 trillion outstanding this year.

A report published by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and U.S. Department of Education concluded lax underwriting practices and borrowers trapped by the market’s natural rise and fall are the root causes of spiraling college debt.

Taxpayers are on the hook for the vast majority of this: $864 billion of loans outstanding are from federal aid, and $150 billion is from private lenders. That leads researchers to conclude government is the problem, said Jay Greene, a University of Arkansas professor who has studied college cost inflation.

“We don’t have a properly functioning market for higher education, and that is the heart of the problem,” he said. “The government is providing very large subsidies in multiple forms, including the overly generous provision of credit in a way that no private creditor would do.”

Infinitely available government funds fuel rising tuition and flagrantly unnecessary expenditures, he said. The congressionally mandated study notes most students do not understand the debt they will incur and its consequences.

Meddling with the Market

The average graduating senior’s debt is approximately $27,000, a generally manageable figure lost in hype about college loans that top $100,000 for a tiny minority, said Jenna Robinson, the campus outreach coordinator for the John W. Pope Center for Higher Education Policy.

“That amount you can borrow easily just from federal loans,” she said. “So for most students private loans are not a problem.”

The federal government nationalized formerly subsidized student loans in 2010 and has imposed significant regulations on private loans. One disallows discharging student loans in bankruptcy, something Robinson says exacerbates the problem.

“Lenders have no incentive to be responsible with whom they lend to, whether they are a bad risk,” she said. “With student lending, you don’t have normal market signals to the student about the loan.”

Less government aid would allow a more competitive loan environment for students, said Jonathan Robe, administrative director of the Center for College Affordability and Productivity.

Encouraging Debt, High Costs

A stagnant job market also means most students don’t have a realistic picture of their post-graduation financial prospects, causing them to borrow irrationally, Robinson said.

Federal Stafford Loans and Pell Grants to low- and middle-income students encourage them to finance education through debt and some to pursue college at the expense of better-fitting options. Such loans are easily available regardless of students’ ability to get through college or make money using their degree upon graduation, Robe said.

“The basic idea behind the report is that these government loans are the best thing that have been devised and it’s a very terrific way for paying for college, but the reality is, the opposite might be true,” Robe said. “Federal loan programs make college costs rise faster and more than they normally would.”

Out of Control Costs

College costs have increased more than 400 percent in the past 40 years—faster than health care. Government programs contribute to that increase by making more money available for colleges to capture by raising prices, Robe said.

Colleges lavish the extra money on nonacademic amenities such as fitness centers and student entertainment, Greene said.

“The more the government tries to subsidize education to make it more affordable, the more these institutions capture it for their own benefit, so it provides virtually no relief for consumers but drives up the cost to society,” he said.

Big Picture Solutions

The report recommends “common-sense” approaches such as better informing borrowers and having lenders work closely with schools’ financial aid offices.

Universities should be “more transparent about student job prospects” so students can make more informed decisions, Robinson said.

“This won’t go on forever,” Greene said. “The federal government can print money to solve its problems, but there are consequences to that, and we’re starting to hit real limits.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.aa@google mail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
Almost a quarter of BASIS public charter school students graduate as National Merit Scholars, and all pass at least six Advanced Placement tests.

The network of innovative public schools expanded to Washington, DC this year, opening its first school outside of Arizona. It plans to continue expanding.

“The BASIS school network is really designed to bring a true international-standard education to the United States,” said cofounder Michael Block. “Our students should be in classes where no place on the planet are students at the same age in public schools learning more.”

Students receive strong grounding in math, science, art, music, history, and literature. Fifth- and sixth-graders learn Latin to help them master English grammar. Eighth-graders learn Algebra II, and ninth-graders learn pre-calculus. Eighth-graders take Cambridge exams, which British students take at age 16.

BASIS campuses, like all charter schools, must accept all applicants or hold admissions lotteries when more apply than schools can hold. Several of the schools have landed in the Newsweek and Washington Post top ten U.S. rankings.

“There’s] a serious gap between what people think are good schools in America and what are really good schools by international standards,” Block said.

Excitement for Knowledge
BASIS hires teachers regardless of certification who demonstrate passion for their field. Many hold advanced degrees. The schools offer salary bonuses for high student achievement. Great teaching comes from thorough subject knowledge, Block said.

“We will have Ph.D.s teaching fifth- and sixth-graders sometimes,” Block said. “Unless you know the material forwards and backwards, you can’t teach young children.”

Teachers’ passion for their material creates an exciting environment, said Mary Siddall, who chaired the committee to bring BASIS to DC.

“When I was at the BASIS teacher training, I thought I was in grad school again,” she said. “There’s the mathematician. There’s the microbiologist, and the artist, and the distinguished literary critic. They have these amazing, interesting conversations, and that’s what BASIS is. We create a culture where learning and knowledge are good, as an end in itself.”

Responsibility Fosters Engagement
That environment instills love for learning in students, said Allison Kimmel, a research assistant for the American Enterprise Institute who sat in on a BASIS summer program.

“This fifth grader came up to me and was shaking my hand, and he said, ‘I’m just so happy here,’” Kimmel said. “You could tell [students] wanted to be there.”

The atmosphere teaches students to be serious about learning, a trait that propels them toward college, Siddall said.

“We teach them how to take responsibility for their own education so that parents don’t have to,” Siddall added. “BASIS students learn how to become scholars.”

Searching for Satisfaction
BASIS began after Block and his wife, Olga, realized how poorly American students compare to international students.

“It was almost always the case that the students who were educated in Europe or Asia just did better, even than very talented American students,” Block said of his experience as an economics professor. “They were just better prepared.”

Olga Block brought her daughter to Arizona from Prague and put her in what she thought was a good suburban public school, but quickly became dissatisfied.

“She noticed that there were a lot of admirable things about American schools, but one of those wasn’t the content and organization of the curriculum,” Michael Block said.

So they founded BASIS.

Parents Want Serious Schools
Interest in rigorous, classical education has been growing across the country, said Phillip Kilgore, director of charter school development at Hillsdale College.

“There continue to be stories in the news about different kinds of schools, school choice, vouchers, or charter schools. The homeschool movement continues to grow. Parents just become more aware of different options,” he said. “It has a self-feeding cycle.”

The interest in rigorous, classical education generally begins with dissatisfaction with public schools, Kilgore said.

“[Parents] may not necessarily know what they’re searching for, but when they hear the details, I think it resonates in their own heart what would be a good education for their child,” he said.

That interest is taking root across the country without regard to geography or demographic, he said.

“It’s the kind of education and school that we know is desperately needed and not easily found in the public schools,” he said.

Regulatory Roadblocks
BASIS intends to spread across the country, Block said.

“There’s] about half a dozen states where conceivably we can operate, and we’re looking at expanding into those states,” he said. “But it’s a pretty narrow number of states we can expand into. And even in those states, it’s difficult to get approval to put schools in suburbs, so we’re toying with the idea of doing independent schools in some states where we can’t have charters.”

BASIS-DC opened this fall for grades 5 to 8, and will add one grade per year until it runs from grade 5 through 12, like the other campuses. Students come from “all over the city” and varied education backgrounds, Siddall said.

“This is a school that was built for the ordinary child, but we can take them to extraordinary levels,” she said. “Any parent who wants that for their child is the kind of parent that we have. And any student who wants to learn, … that’s the kind of students we have.”

Mary Petrides Tillotson (mary.c.tillotson@gmail.com), a former Michigan reporter, now writes from Front Royal, Virginia.
‘Won’t Back Down’ Celebrates Parent Activism

By Joel Pavelski

Do you really think you could change things?

That’s a big question being asked by Won’t Back Down, a movie released nationwide on September 28 with a rare Hollywood mix of blistering policy debate and big-screen drama.

The policy debate centers on Parent Trigger laws, which enable parents to require changes, such as restructuring or conversion to a charter school, at low-performing schools. Seven states currently have Parent Trigger laws, and 15 more are considering them, according to community organizer Parent Revolution.

Won’t Back Down seeks to cut through the political controversy surrounding Parent Trigger laws and display a very human story. And its big stars and big heart don’t hurt.

Movie Star Power
The Walden Media movie, starring Maggie Gyllenhaal and Viola Davis, tells the inspiring story of two fed-up moms, one a teacher, banding together to transform their children’s failing urban school. Shot and set in Pittsburgh (though Pennsylvania doesn’t have a Parent Trigger law), the movie is fiction but claims to be “inspired by true events,” a description that has riled some people because no trigger-inspired takeover has yet been completed.

This isn’t the first time Walden Media, backed by billionaire Philip Anschutz, has dipped its toe into education controversy—it advocated charter schools, objective teacher evaluations, and ending tenure in the 2010 documentary Waiting for Superman. That film made less money than expected and received no big awards after being savaged by union officials.

Won’t Back Down has already faced the ire of angry union supporters and anti-trigger advocates on social media outlets.

This movie is different because it clears the controversy and focuses on what matters: parents and teachers improving life for their kids.

The movie opens in a noisy classroom at the fictional John Adams Elementary. Little Malia struggles through sounding out the word “order,” while an exasperated teacher rolls her eyes. Malia gives up, tears in her eyes, saying, “I can’t.”

Parent Power
Enter Malia’s mother, a gritty blue-collar mom Gyllenhaal plays with jarring tenacity. Desperate for options, unable to afford private school, and a loser at the charter school lottery, she turns to a tired, equally frustrated teacher (Davis) after hearing about “a law that lets parents turn schools around.”

Together they rouse their community by knocking on doors, printing flyers, and even throwing a rally at a car lot, all to fix a school that everyone else seems to think may not be worth the effort.

The duo must convince teachers, generate ideas to improve learning, and fight a system that embraces futility. In one memorable montage, the protagonists meet with school board officials, their mouths agape at the technicalities required just to schedule a hearing.

Rotten System
It’s a Hollywood movie and a straight-up good-triumphs-over-evil tale, so there must be a bad guy. It’s the bureaucracy. The viewers are told, via a frustrated teacher, “The only thing the district does right is cover up what it does wrong.”

The union is also a villain because of its exclusive focus on teacher comfort instead of kids.

Teachers themselves are never vilified, however, instead portrayed as frustrated victims like their students, thwarted by a rotten system. An increasingly disillusioned union worker, played smartly by Holly Hunter, tries to help one kid by sacrificing a school of them, and she ends up just as frustrated as any mom or teacher in the film.

One lucid theme keeps Won’t Back Down from being political messaging: hope. It’s like a soaring, joyful message from the other side of America’s education challenges, an admonishment to refuse to give up. Desperation turns to joyful aspiration as these parents and teachers realize change is possible.

At one point, when Gyllenhaal and Davis are convincing Adams Elementary teachers to join their cause, one teacher asks honestly, “Do you really think you could change things?” Davis dithers, but Gyllenhaal’s hero-mom looks at the teacher and the movie audience steely-eyed, with a clear, forceful conviction, and says, “100 percent, yes.”

We have to hope she’s right—and that she’s not the only mom who won’t back down in tackling failing schools.

By Joy Pullmann

A new poll has found 65 percent of North Carolina voters support expanding charter schools and allowing tax credit scholarships, and 55 percent believe the state’s education system is “on the wrong track.”

“Parents want choice in education. Support for charter schools, tax credit scholarships, and education savings accounts tells us that,” said Robert Luebke, a senior policy analyst with the Civitas Institute. Civitas and the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice commissioned the poll.

If voters could enroll their child in any school they want—determined by a lottery, they told pollsters from Braun Research, Inc., 34 percent would pick traditional public schools, while 39 percent would choose private schools, 15 percent charter schools, and 11 percent would home-school.

Currently, 87 percent of North Carolina students attend traditional schools, under 3 percent attend charters, nearly 6 percent attend private schools, and 5 percent are home-schooled.

Seventy-eight percent of voters said they paid attention to K-12 education, while 21 percent said they paid “very little” or “no” attention. Seventy-one percent either guessed the state spent less than $4,000 per student or said they couldn’t guess. North Carolina spends nearly $9,000 per student.

Braun polled 601 North Carolinians. The poll’s margin of error was 4 percent.

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

North Carolina Voters Support Charter Schools, Vouchers

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How Private Schools Encourage Improvement in Public Schools

By Herbert J. Walberg

In big cities, as many as 80 percent of public school parents say they would send their children to parochial or independent schools if they could afford tuition. Scholarships for poor families are heavily oversubscribed, as are charter schools, which are government-funded but run by private boards. Do private schools deserve their reputations and consumer preference?

In 2007, I tried to track down all studies of this question and summarized the findings in the book School Choice: The Findings. Included were studies that compared similar students in private and nearby public schools. Since 2007, research continued to show that, on average, private school students excel in academic skills such as reading comprehension and knowledge in such subjects as English, mathematics, and science. Studies, moreover, show that the higher the percentage of students attending private schools (including charters) in a locality or state, the higher the average achievement of all schools.

Studies of countries show the same pattern. Private schools not only raise the overall average but set high standards and promote competition among all schools.

Lower Costs, Happier Customers
Some of the comparative U.S. studies of public schools and private schools (including charters) report on parents’ satisfaction, reputation among nearby citizens, and the degree to which students were involved in the life of the school and engaged in volunteer work, such as tutoring other students and helping in community affairs. Again, private schools excelled.

Particularly important is the average annual per-student cost of schools, since the United States typically ranks near the top even though its average student achievement lags behind most other advanced economies. On average, educating students at private schools costs about half as much as it does at nearby public schools.

Such findings are hardly restricted to schools. Other things being equal, an amazing variety of private organizations perform, on average, better than government-run organizations at lower costs, and they are more satisfying to their staffs and their customers. These studies examined, among others, airlines, banks, bus service, debt collection, electric and water utilities, forestry, hospitals, housing, railroads, refuse collection, and weather forecasting. U.S. and foreign governments are even beginning to privatize prisons, police, fire protection, and public pensions.

Private competition works well for consumers, allows successful contenders to thrive, and causes failing organizations to change or close. In private enterprise such “creative destruction” is both expected and a sign of progress.

Monopolies Generate Failure
In contrast, U.S. public schools have deteriorated in the past century. In the past, local citizens governed about 115,000 school districts nationwide, some with only a single school for a few hundred students or even less. States consolidated these into about 15,000 much larger districts today. Chicago, for example, has more than 600 public schools, one with more than 4,000 students. Today’s school boards are poorly informed about the schools under their jurisdiction.

At the same time, states and the federal government imposed ever more complications and sometimes-conflicting regulations on the public schools, which removed much of local boards’ control over school policy. Moreover, national and local teachers unions increasingly exerted powerful and constraining forces on boards, representing their own interests rather than those of students.

In contrast, private schools are usually small, and their boards closely inform themselves about the school’s staff and programs. Unlike public schools, private school teachers, students, and parents know each other well. Seldom unionized, private schools pay teachers according to their contributions and performance and remove those who don’t pull their weight.

Private schools have another important advantage. Parents and students choose them, unlike public school students, who are usually assigned to a single school. Psychological studies show Americans are more enthusiastic about things they choose for themselves.

Specialization and Innovation
Today, the total number of charter schools in this country is about 5,000. About 60 percent have waiting lists. Charter boards, which typically control only one school, usually lack the time and breadth to carry out all their responsibilities. The Chicago International Charter School, now with 16 campuses, responded to this challenge by maintaining a small central staff while assigning for-profit and non-profit organizations to carry out a uniform curriculum.

The clear division of responsibility and work was efficient in allowing each group to concentrate on its strengths. It also allowed the board objectivity in holding the competing organizations accountable for achievement results, enrollment, and parent satisfaction. This model deserves expansion.

The next logical step in attaining effectiveness and efficiency is for-profit competition. In 1993 the Swedish government, with my advice, required local school district authorities to fund privately operated schools, including for-profit schools. Like traditional public schools, the flood of new private schools had to teach an approved curriculum and admit all applicants regardless of ability, socioeconomic level, and country of origin.

The rapidly changed system yielded excellent achievement results and parent satisfaction. By 2008, 10 growing chains of schools operated, one with as many as 30 schools. The transformed system interjected not only competition among all schools but also new technologies including frequent Internet reporting to parents on students’ progress. Given our long history of successful capitalism, for-profit competition among schools seems likely to work just as well in capitalistic America as social-democratic Sweden.

Herbert J. Walberg is a distinguished visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution and a member of the Koret Task Force on K–12 Education. He chairs the board of directors of The Heartland Institute. This essay is adapted with permission from Hoover’s journal, Defining Ideas.
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Chair, International Comparative Research on
Educational Performance and Social Inequality
Maastricht University
Research Centre For Education And The Labour Market

Professor Paul T. Hill, PhD.
Founder and Director Emeritus Center on Reinventing
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Professor, University of Washington Bothell

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The International School Choice Landscape: Four Experiences
Professor Chris Chapman, University of Manchester, U.K.
Liespeth van Welie, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Professor Nihad Bunar, University of Stockholm, Sweden
Dr. Liz Gordon, Pukeko Research Limited, New Zealand
Session Chair, Professor Robert Fox, University of Hawai‘i

WHO SHOULD ATTEND
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