Due to legislation signed earlier this year by Gov. Rick Scott (R), approximately 10,000 more low-income Florida students are attending private schools on tax-credit-funded private scholarships than in past years.

After the program’s waiting list reached 10,000, Florida increased the program’s cap from $140 million to $229 million.

Lawmakers also decided that every year the amount credited reaches at least 90 percent of the cap allowance, the cap will increase by 25 percent the following year, without further action by the legislature.

The Step Up for Students (SUFS) tax credit program lets citizens receive tax credits on Florida returns for SUFS donations.

Rapid Growth

Last year, SUFS served 40,248 students in 1,216 schools, according to Jon East, the program’s vice president for policy and public affairs.
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**By Casey Harper**

High-performing teachers are leaving urban school districts that make little or no pay, promotion, or personal distinctions between them and poor teachers, according to a report from The New Teacher Project. The study surveyed 90,000 teachers in four urban districts.

The report estimates the nation’s 50 largest school districts lose approximately 10,000 high-performing teachers every year. These districts enroll approximately 7.9 million students, or 14 percent of the nation’s schoolchildren.

“The real story of this study is the neglect of great teachers, those we’ve called irreplaceables,” said David Keeling, a report author. “The main thing is to start … encouraging and rewarding our best teachers while ushering chronically unsuccessful teachers out of the classroom.”

Irreplaceables constitute the top 20 percent of teachers. They generate five to six more months of student learning each year than do poor-performing teachers.

“Districts have very little difference between the retention rates of the top teachers and the retention rates of their lowest-performing teachers,” Keeling said.

**Little Effort Made**

About 55 percent of the irreplaceables earn lower salaries than the average ineffective teacher, the study found. Compensation was one of the most frequently stated reasons irreplaceables gave for leaving schools.

“Right now, the way that we pay teachers is entirely based on years of experience and credentials, which are two things that we know are just unrelated to how effective a teacher is in the classroom,” said Marcus Winters, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. “If we can target higher salaries to precisely the kind of teachers we want to keep, then we would be more likely to keep more of the best teachers in the classroom.”

The study found fewer than 30 percent of irreplaceables said their schools had identified opportunities for them to function as lead teachers; such positions were offered just as often to lower-performing teachers or didn’t exist. Offering irreplaceables such career opportunities is key to attracting and retaining them, said Bryan Hassel, co-director of the education consulting firm Public Impact.

“In other professions like law and medicine, there are many ways for people to advance in their careers,” Hassel said. “They can manage other professionals, or specialize in a wide array of focus areas, and they can do these things while continuing to practice their profession. Teaching lacks this kind of opportunity array—unless you’re willing to leave teaching and become an administrator.”

**Low-Cost Strategies**

The study recommends simple, low-cost strategies for retaining irreplaceables. These include regular positive feedback, identifying skills to develop, giving critical feedback informally, recognizing accomplishments publicly, informing top teachers that they are high-performing, and providing access to additional classroom resources. Top teachers who experience two or more of these retention strategies report they plan to keep teaching at their schools for nearly twice as long as top teachers who do not.

“There are very simple things that principals can do that don’t necessarily take a lot of extra effort that can start to build the kind of culture that supports high-performing teachers and encourages them to stay in their classrooms,” Keeling said.

A culture of high expectations also can improve retention. Almost 90 percent of teachers at schools with high expectations said they were satisfied with their work environment, compared with 55 to 62 percent in urban districts with low expectations.

**Barriers to Retention**

The New Teacher Project’s 2009 study, “The Widget Effect,” found nearly all teachers receive “good” or “great” evaluations with little insight into their performance, making it difficult for principals to identify irreplaceables or low performers.

Winters recommends ditching states’ burdensome and useless certification and degree requirements.

The “Irreplaceables” study found 40 percent of teachers with more than seven years of experience are less effective than the average first-year teacher. Winters says principals face serious roadblocks in removing these ineffective teachers, particularly because nearly all of them have tenure.

“Getting rid of a tenured teacher for poor performance is theoretically possible, but in practice it is such a burdensome process with such little probability of success that the vast majority of principals don’t even try,” Winters said.

Casey Harper (casey.harper33@gmail.com) writes from Hillsdale, Michigan.
Chicag Public Schools’ 350,000 students lost instruction in the second week of school as teachers went on strike for the first time in 25 years. The strike lasted seven school days, which students and teachers will make up during previously scheduled breaks.

It ended with a new contract splitting the difference over most points of contention. Half of the laid-off teachers must be first in line for new openings, rather than all, as the Chicago Teachers Union wanted. The district will follow state law in tying 25 percent of a teacher’s evaluation to student test scores. Teachers will also receive a 7 percent raise over the next three years.

Approximately a week after the deal, Moody’s downgraded the district’s debt rating, citing its looming $1 billion shortfall in 2014 and increased spending under the agreement.

Despite negotiating for a new contract all summer, CPS and CTU failed to reach an agreement in early September. CTU called for a strike. Approximately 25,000 teachers began picketing outside their schools in the nation’s third-largest school district.

“It is time that good teachers be rewarded and bad teachers be let go,” said John Nothdurft, government relations director for The Heartland Institute. “[CTU President] Karen Lewis and the union leadership’s decision to move forward with the strike rather than postpone put children and parents in a tragic and unnecessary situation.”

Union Rejected Pay Raise

In summer negotiations, CPS had offered teachers a four-year package worth $400 million that would have increased the average teacher’s compensation by 16 percent over that time, said Chicago School Board President David Vitale. The city expects a $3 billion budget deficit over the next three years, plus a $2 billion pension deficit over the next two years. CPS’s annual spending is approximately $5.5 billion.

After the union’s contract expired in June, it engaged in contentious talks with Mayor Rahm Emanuel, President Barack Obama’s former chief of staff, over policies the president and U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan have endorsed. Duncan was Chicago schools chief before his current position.

“In the end, it’s like saying, ‘I’ll be bloodied and you’ll be bloodied, but at least you’ll know not to bully me again,'” Jay Rehak, a union delegate and high school English teacher, told the Chicago Tribune.

Major Points of Contention

Emanuel said negotiations broke down over two main issues: evaluating teachers by whether they raise students’ academic achievement, and authority for principals to hire teachers they think best.

“Evaluate us on what we do, not the lives of children we do not control,” Lewis said, blaming parents and the city’s social environment for poor academic results.

Obama and Duncan support data-based teacher evaluations, requiring states to adopt them in return for Race to the Top grants and waivers of No Child Left Behind, the largest federal education law.

Low Accountability, High Pay

A 2005 survey of Illinois data by the Small Newspaper Group found that, of 95,000 Illinois teachers, an average of two each year were fired for academic incompetence over an 18-year period. It also found approximately 0.1 percent of Illinois teachers were ever rated “unsatisfactory” on existing evaluations.

In every state that has adopted them, data-based teacher evaluations rate a teacher partly by how much he or she adds to students’ knowledge. Teachers are not penalized for students entering their classrooms ignorant, only for not teaching those children during the time they’re in their classrooms.

The average Chicago teacher already makes one-third more than the average Chicago worker, at $76,450 a year, and for 10 months of work at seven hours of work a day, under their most recent contract. That figure does not include health care and pension benefits. Chicago teachers can retire at age 60 on a taxpayer-sponsored pension worth 75 percent of their highest annual salary.

Chicago students score worse than 68 percent of their U.S. peers in reading and worse than 63 percent in math, according to the Global Report Card. They score worse than 79 percent of their international peers in math and worse than 65 percent in reading. City officials recently celebrated a 60.6 percent graduation rate.

Charter Students Unaffected

The city’s approximately 50,000 charter school students are unaffected by the strike, as charter schools are independently run and largely nonunion, though still public schools.

“Thanks to Chicago’s independently managed charter schools,... 50,000 of Chicago’s 400,000 public school children will not be shortchanged,” said Robert Holland, a senior fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute. “That reality could strongly reinforce in parents’ minds the desirability of school choice for all children.”

CPS spends almost $16,000 per student, according to the Cato Institute. That’s enough to pay for a student to attend 64 of Chicago Magazine’s top 70 private schools. Tuition at most of these schools, for the elementary years, runs between $3,000 and $8,000.

Emanuel, Obama, and Duncan support charter schools and have called for their numbers to increase. CTU strenuously objects to charters.

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is managing editor of School Reform News and a research fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute.
How Would Americans Cut Education Spending?

By Joy Pullmann

When state and local education budgets need cutting, Americans favor firing administrators, freezing salaries, basing layoffs on performance instead of seniority, increasing the number of students top teachers teach, and replacing pensions with individual retirement plans, according to a new poll. “The big challenge is turning those sound views into prudent yet forceful action.”

U.S. education spending has roughly tripled in the past 50 years in inflation-adjusted dollars, according to the Cato Institute. In 2010–11 it remained stable, largely because the recession forced lawmakers to refuse spending increases. Though student enrollment rose 24 percent between 1986 and 2009, the report observes, the number of teachers in U.S. schools grew by 43 percent and “instructional support staff” increased 150 percent.

Appetite for Tough Choices

Researchers from the FDR Group polled 1,009 Americans aged 18 and older, approximately one-quarter of whom were parents of school-age children. Before polling, researchers formed in-person focus groups in four U.S. cities to field-test questions for accuracy and plumb public opinion in greater depth.

Pollster and report coauthor Ann Duffett said she was “bursting to tell people” how seriously the average citizens her research team pulled in took the policy decisions they were asked to comment on. “Folks of all ages, and it seemed all types of people, really wanted to talk about their reasoning,” she said.

Adults who were not parents had opinions right in line with parents, she said. “A lot of times we asked these forced-choice questions because we don’t like the easy answers: ‘If you had to pick, which would it be?’ [Respondents] knew they would be disappointing somebody, but they did it,” she said. “They know that it’s tough times—they had a gut instinct to save jobs. If layoffs were inevitable, they wanted kids’ interests to be first. They can make that choice.”

End Seniority, Restructure Pensions

By 74 to 18 percent, respondents agreed teachers with poor performance should be “laid off first and those with excellent performance protected” rather than have “newcomers laid off first and veteran teachers protected.”

Duffett said she observed openness among participants to replacing traditional defined-benefit public-sector pensions with individual plans more common in the private sector, and that the poll reveals an opening for lawmakers to make their case for that and other, bigger changes.

“Make sure they know why you’re making cuts and make that public engagement part of your decision-making process,” she said.

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is managing editor of School Reform News and a research fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute.
Large Numbers of Children Say School Is ‘Too Easy’

By Casey Harper

Between 30 and 40 percent of students in every grade level say school is “too easy,” according to a report from the Center for American Progress.

The report examined student surveys collected by the National Association for Educational Progress, a widely trusted nationwide test conducted every year.

“There’s a popular perception that students are overworked and underplayed, that they are taking home 40-pound backpacks full of schoolwork, but our overall analysis found just the opposite,” said Ulrich Boser, a CAP senior fellow and report coauthor. “The large majority of students are not being challenged in school.”

Underworked and Overplayed

More than half of the nation’s eighth-grade history and civics students say their work is “often or always too easy,” according to the report. Twelfth-grade students sang the same tune, with 56 and 55 percent, respectively, saying their civics and history work is “often” or “always” too easy.

Almost a third of the eighth-grade students reported reading fewer than five pages a day either in school or for homework, below what many experts recommend for students in middle school.

There’s been a gradual diminishing of outside reading and homework because teachers increasingly found that students were coming to class without having done it,” said Sandra Stotsky, professor of education reform at the University of Arkansas. According to the study, 37 percent of fourth-graders, 29 percent of eighth-graders, and 21 percent of 12th-graders say their math work is often or always too easy.

“Our expectations in mathematics and science are a year or two behind the higher-achieving countries around the world,” said Ze’ev Wurman, a former senior policy advisor for the U.S. Department of Education. “Schools have been dumbed down over the years.”

Common Core to the Rescue?
The report recommends more “rigorous standards like those put forth through the Common Core” to combat schools’ apparent lack of academic rigor.

Stotsky questions that recommendation, saying Common Core attempts to lift only below-average students, with no effect on average and above-average students, those who feel unchallenged.

“When Boser says more kids will be working harder under Common Core, I don’t know where he is getting that from,” Stotsky said. “Common Core is stronger than many states’ standards in K-5, but by the time students get to high school, [the] English and math standards are behind and are not internationally benchmarked.”

Other countries tend to teach algebra in grades eight and nine, Wurman noted. It has taken a decade for the U.S. to reach the point where more than 40 percent of eighth-grade students take algebra.

“In 1998, we had 17 percent of students in California taking algebra in the eighth grade,” Wurman said. “Now we have 65 percent. Common Core wants to teach algebra in high school, so we are basically giving up what we won in the war of the last decade.”

Casey Harper (casey.harper33@gmail.com) writes from Hillsdale, Michigan.
Mich. Lawmakers Look at Teacher Pension Reform

By Michal Conger

To address Michigan’s chronically deficit-plagued government pension system, Michigan Senate Republicans are reviving an effort to switch new public school employees to 401(k)-style retirement plans.

Senate Bill 1040 would close the current system to new employees and implement a defined-contribution plan to pay employees’ retirement benefits as they earn them, instead of promising a defined benefit that pays out regardless of how much the fund contains.

The switch met resistance in the House. The House bill would have preserved a “hybrid” pension plan combining elements of both proposals while capping school districts’ contributions. Senate Republicans rejected the House version July 17. Lawmakers will reconsider the subject during a scattering of fall session days.

‘Predictable Crisis’
The House bill doesn’t fully address the state’s $45 billion unfunded liability, Senate leaders said.

“This is the most predictable crisis that we have,” said state Sen. Phil Pavlov (R-St. Clair), the Senate Education Committee chairman. He has been working on legislation that can pass both chambers and avoids the “exploding debt” created by a defined-benefit system.

The current system has put off taxpayer-sponsored pension payments until retirees begin drawing them out rather than prefunding it decades ahead as most private plans do.

“The idea is we’re setting aside taxes today to make the payments in the future,” explained Gary Wolfram, a Michigan economist and Hillsdale College professor. “But at some point enough teachers retire that the problem comes home to roost.”

Robbing Classrooms’
The state made a similar switch for its nonpublic school employees in 1997. It saved taxpayers $167 million in annual pension costs and $2.3 billion to $4.3 billion more in unfunded liabilities, wrote James Hohman in a report for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.

By capping at 24 percent the amount school districts contribute, a priority in both chambers, districts are estimated to save up to $300 million in pension contribution costs this school year.

“That’s how much we’ve been robbing classrooms,” Pavlov said.

Transition Cost Concerns
Some lawmakers have voiced objections over transition costs. Hohman said transition costs are “a convenient excuse” and shouldn’t prevent closing the system to address its ballooning costs.

“Only the Senate plan fixes the problems of the pension system. The House plan doubles down on the current defined-benefit system,” he said.

Gov. Rick Snyder (R) supports the House version but urges capping contributions and prefunding health care to contain costs.

Michal Conger (mconger@washingtontimes.com) is a digital editor for Times247.

Unions Block Evaluations as Fewer New York City Teachers Receive Tenure

By Vicki Alger

Just 55 percent of New York City teachers completing their three-year probationary periods earned tenure in 2012, compared with 97 percent in 2007.

Another 42 percent of teachers were granted an additional probationary year, while 3 percent were denied tenure.

“Receiving tenure is no longer an automatic right, and our new approach ensures that teachers who are granted tenure have earned it,” said NYC Schools Chancellor Dennis Walcott in a press statement. “We must improve the tenure process even further, and a teacher evaluation system will do just that and ensure our children are taught by the best.”

In the rest of the state’s 700 districts, unions are largely blocking a law likely to lead to similar results statewide.

Stronger Evaluations
Gov. Andrew Cuomo (D) devised a stronger teacher evaluation system in February 2011 and netted broad support for it, including from teachers unions.

Students’ academic growth now represents 20 percent of a New York teacher’s evaluation, adjusted for student factors such as prior academic history, poverty, English abilities, and disabilities. Local collective bargaining agreements determine the other 80 percent.

Twenty percent of the local evaluation must consider student achievement, according to the new law, whereas 60 percent may be based on “soft” measures such as supervisor observations and parent or student surveys.

Unions Block Implementation
Every New York school district was supposed to submit its evaluation plan for state Education Department approval no later than July 1. Just 164 districts met that deadline, rising to 214 as of the latest update on July 20.

That means less than a third of the state’s districts have complied with the law, leaving nearly 500 districts, including New York City, debating the details with union locals.

State education officials are reviewing district plans, and spokesman Jonathan Burman said state Commissioner John King Jr. is optimistic all districts will ultimately submit their evaluation agreements.

“This is a sea change in education,” King said, adding the department will periodically update the number of district evaluation plans submitted.

Changing the System
“The more unions have the ability to veto [teacher evaluation plans], the harder it is to get a plan that works,” said Marcus Winters, a Manhattan Institute senior fellow. In spite of union resistance, he said, “Unions are changing their tune and participating in the reform design.”

New York has made significant progress improving teacher evaluations over the past few years, Winters said. The state’s teacher evaluation and tenure reforms are “changing the default of the system,” he said, meaning more teachers who shouldn’t be in the classroom won’t be.

Vicki Alger, Ph.D. (heartlander@vickialger.com) is a senior fellow at the Independent Women’s Forum. She is also a research fellow at the Independent Institute in Oakland, California, working on a book examining the history of the U.S. Department of Education.
Nevada Union Threatens to Sue Group

By Evelyn B. Stacey

Union officials in the fifth-largest U.S. school district don’t know how a free-market think tank obtained teachers’ email addresses to send union opt-out information, but they’re filing a lawsuit over it.

Nevada’s Clark County School District teachers can leave their local union only between July 1 and July 15 each year. The Nevada Policy Research Institute sent emails to nearly 12,000 teachers informing them of that option and the narrow window of opportunity.

“One teacher we’ve talked with didn’t know they had rights and options,” said Andy Matthews, NPRI’s president.

The district says it did not provide NPRI a list of all 40,000 district teacher email addresses, as the organization requested in a public records request. CEA officials said the union plans to file a lawsuit against the district for unfair labor practices and will “investigate” the matter internally.

The debate comes at a time of growing discontent with unions nationwide. A recent Harvard University public opinion survey found the number of people who believe unions make a positive contribution to education fell from 29 percent to 22 percent in the past year.

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

Texas Senate Panel Considers School Choice

“[W]hen competition is introduced for [teachers’] skills, they are paid more, [working] conditions improve, and more money flows into the classroom.”

JOSEPH BAST, PRESIDENT
THE HEARTLAND INSTITUTE

Continued from page 1

cost of tuition or 60 percent of the state average per-pupil expenditure—approximately $5,200 on average—whichever is less.

Texas taxpayers would save an average of $3,429 for each grant, leaving more money to spend on students who remain in government schools. Bast has calculated approximately 5.8 percent of public school students’ families would choose a TSG in its first year, as many as 300,000 students.

In 2011, Texas legislators cut $4 billion from education to stem a massive deficit, and they expect another big deficit this year. Texas currently spends approximately $45 billion each year on K-12 education.

Empowering Parents, Students

Matthew Ladner told the committee school choice reverses the top-down approach of school administrators and government. Ladner is a senior policy and research advisor to the Foundation for Excellence in Education.

“We like to think of school choice as a bottom-up solution that empowers parents and students,” he said.

Ladner discussed the success of Florida’s McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities, which provided more than 24,000 special-needs students the opportunity to attend a participating private school during 2011–12.

Although Texas has embraced charter schools to some extent, it has not advanced broader choice such as that offered in vouchers, noted Robert Enlow, president of the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

He cited Indiana’s recent experience. The state has begun the second year of a statewide voucher program that grants vouchers worth up to approximately $5,000. Last year, more than 3,900 students enrolled in the program. This year, the state reports that number has more than doubled.

“We know from the first year that Indiana children are learning more and retaining more,” Enlow told the committee.

When asked by state Sen. Wendy Davis (D-Fort Worth) what sort of accountability the program provided, Enlow responded private and charter schools are more accountable than public schools because they are accountable directly to parents and to state testing requirements.

Schools Likened to Factories

Texas schools currently treat students like products in a ball-bearing factory, where each unit must meet specifications and be identical, said Andrew Erben, president of the Texas Institute for Education Reform.

“We’re not addressing [students’] differences,” he said.

Erben suggested introducing more competition and eliminating wasteful spending. “We should be letting the parents and students decide what’s best for them. The numbers show that we do not have enough options for them,” he told senators.

Many more parents want school choice than can access it in Texas, said Matthew Barnes, executive director of Families Empowered. He noted KIPP Charter Schools and Yes Prep Public Charter Schools in Houston had more students waitlisted than enrolled. Their waitlists top 12,000 students.

“There really is a demand for higher-standard schools,” he said.

Benefits to Teachers

Bast says teachers, who often fiercely oppose vouchers, should support TSG.

“Oftentimes teachers in rural areas are employed in a monopsony [many sellers, one buyer] market. But when competition is introduced for their skills, they are paid more, [working] conditions improve, and more money flows into the classroom,” he said.

Wherever school competition exists, parents, students, and teachers are better matched, “so the TSG program will provide a win, win, win situation,” he said.

In the 2011 legislative session, TSGs were considered tax legislation rather than education legislation, Bast noted.

“There is a laundry list of ways you can design a voucher program, but ours is only two paragraphs long,” he said.

Kenneth Ariz (iamkenartz@hotmail.com) is a freelance reporter for The Heartland Institute based in Dallas, Texas.
EPA Is a Rogue Agency
The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is the nation’s leading job killer, implementing and enforcing laws that impose impossible regulatory burdens on American businesses. EPA has perverted the Clean Air Act by declaring carbon dioxide a “pollutant,” despite the plain intent of the law’s authors to exclude such naturally occurring gases, and despite major flaws in the science used to claim carbon dioxide endangers human health.

The Solution
Congress must rein in EPA through deep cuts in the size, power, and cost of the agency. Congress can repeal EPA’s authority to regulate carbon dioxide in the name of “global warming,” and it can demand cost-benefit analysis be applied to all environmental regulations.

The Petition
The Citizen’s Petition to Rein in the Environmental Protection Agency calls out EPA’s unscientific and destructive campaign to frighten people over the threat of man-made global warming and demands “deep cuts in the size, power, and cost of the EPA.” You can sign it online at www.heartland.org, or print out copies and fax signed copies to 312/377-5000, or mail them to us at The Heartland Institute, One South Wacker Drive #2740, Chicago, IL 60606.

You Can Help! By working together, we can rein in the Environmental Protection Agency! We can protect the environment without sacrificing jobs or our essential freedoms.

Please help us. Sign the petition today.

The Heartland Institute
HEARTLAND.ORG
The Heartland Institute is a 28-year-old national nonprofit organization based in Chicago. Its mission is to discover, develop, and promote free-market solutions to social and economic problems. For more information, visit our Web site at heartland.org or call 312/377-4000.
Parents Prefer Private Schools

Seventy-eight percent of U.S. parents say children educated in private schools receive an “excellent” or “good” education, compared to 37 percent who said the same about public schools. Sixty-nine percent rated church-related schools, and 60 percent rated charter schools, as excellent or good.

Though parents gave private schools the highest marks for education quality, 83 percent said their child attends a public school.

— Gallup, August 29, 2012

Indiana’s Reforms Analyzed

Transformative changes to Indiana’s education system will take time to trickle down through layers of school districts, superintendents, and school staff, concludes a new report on the state’s progress since restructuring its system in 2011.

“Local understanding and follow-through of the reforms is instrumental if these measures are to yield more than compliance, wasted spending, or disillusionment from educators,” write report authors Paul Manna, Keenan Kelley, and Frederick Hess.

The analysts interviewed Indiana education leaders to report how well the state’s comprehensive, market-based education reforms have been applied thus far. They say the state should focus next on developing state and local capacity to implement reforms and ending a “culture of compliance” within local school districts.

— Staff reports

Florida Increases Tax Cap for School Choice Program

“It’s the fastest growing, largest education tax credit program in the country. There’s very good evidence that it’s having a positive impact on the achievement of students in public schools.”

ADAM SCHAFFER
EDUCATION POLICY ANALYST
CATO INSTITUTE

“Giving children options does lead to improved outcomes in school districts. It’s not destructive to school districts. It’s actually healthy,” he said. “What we’ve found is the desperate students are the ones looking for other options.”

Students in the program have kept up with national achievement averages, East said. “That’s essentially saying students are gaining a year’s worth of knowledge within a year.”

This is significant, he said, because students who struggle academically usually fall further behind as their school career progresses.

About 2.6 million students attend Florida public schools. About 1.4 million qualify for the scholarships.

One vs. Many Sponsors

Florida’s program allows just one scholarship organization.

“People should support this program the Arizona School Choice Trust board, which also provides tax credit scholarships. The state has more than 50 different scholarship groups.

“Some donors are especially motivated to help Jewish schools, for instance, or Catholic schools,” he said.

But giving parents the choice in the first place is most important, Ladner said.

“Just a lot of us who were fortunate enough to have advantages carefully selected our house based on what school it’s zoned for. Low-income kids don’t have those kinds of options, so it’s a way to help them exercise that kind of choice,” he said.

Bipartisan Support

Bipartisan support for the program has grown, East said.

“In 2010 we had the support of nearly half the Democrats, the majority of the black caucus, and almost the entire Hispanic caucus,” East said. “We’re into our eleventh year, and we’re seeing a growing realization that this is not an ‘us versus them’ kind of thing. This is not public versus private. This is public education more broadly defined, trying to offer low-income kids better learning options they otherwise wouldn’t have had.”

Choice proponents don’t argue private schools are better but simply that they offer different options that benefit children, East said.

“People should support this program whether they’re liberals, conservatives, libertarians, [or] vegetarians,” Ladner said.

Mary Petrides Tillotson (mary.c.tillotson@gmail.com), a former Michigan reporter, now writes from Front Royal, Virginia.
San Antonio Mayor Proposes Tax for More Pre-K

By Sally Nelson

San Antonio Mayor Julian Castro has proposed increasing the city’s sales tax to 8.25 percent to expand government-sponsored pre-kindergarten.

The proposal is estimated to spend $140 million over its first five years to offer taxpayer-paid, full-day programs to 4,000 children each year who, according to state and federal guidelines, are eligible based on low family income, home language, foster care, or being in a military family. These children currently either attend a taxpayer-paid, half-day program or don’t attend preschool.

The program would fund two model pre-K centers and expand existing state- and federally funded pre-K from half- to full-day programs.

Castro’s proposal is “a well-intentioned, but top-down, one-size-fits-all preschool program,” said Vicki Alger, a senior fellow at the Independent Women’s Forum. She said nearly all government preschool advocates promise wildly overblown benefits to children and the economy, but those promises have nearly never materialized.

The city sales tax is currently 8.125 percent. The proposed hike would likely cost the median San Antonio household approximately $7.81 a year, according to Castro. Voters will decide whether to approve the tax hike on the November 6 ballot.

**Poor Track Record**

In May, Castro formed the Brainpower Initiative Task Force, a committee of business and education leaders, to determine whether increased spending could help San Antonio’s education system.

Students who enter kindergarten already knowing basics such as vocabulary and counting perform better in their academic careers, task force member Gillian Williams wrote in the committee’s report.

Georgia and Oklahoma have attempted similar pre-K programs without success, said Lisa Snell, director of education studies at the Reason Foundation.

“Both [states] have had a lot of investment in early childhood education, but their reading scores for fourth-graders have not improved in the [National Assessment for Educational Progress] long-term,” Snell said.

**Positive Outcomes Fade**

Positive outcomes tend to fade as students move from grade to grade through school. It is usually impossible to tell the difference between students who attended preschool and those who didn’t, Snell said.

“In many cases, it’s just an empty promise that they’re going to raise student achievement based on preschool,” she said.

Castro could make no promises about a likely or estimated outcome of the program when pressed by District Nine Councilwoman Elisa Chan during a council meeting when the plan was presented June 20.

“If the mayor really wants San Antonians to control their own destinies, then he will let parents choose where their children go to school,” Alger said.

**Limiting Families**

Universal pre-K forces nongovernment providers to conform to compete for funding, which detracts from their diversity, success, and overall benefits to students, Alger said.

**Minnesota Schools Graduate Failing Students**

By Emmaline Epperson

School districts in Minnesota waive thousands of students to graduation each year, even if those students have failed required high school math exams.

In 2009 the state raised math standards and toughened graduation exams. This year, 43 percent of high school students failed the exam on their first try.

Instead of holding those students back, Minnesota created a waiver system. Students can take the test twice. If they fail both times, the district considers each student’s overall performance and decides whether to grant a waiver.

“Simply passing a waiver is the easiest thing for the system to do, but the most detrimental for the students,” said Jim Bartholomew, the Minnesota Business Partnership’s education policy director.

The exams test basic algebra, geometry, and some higher mathematics.

Minnesota school districts are not required to document how many students receive waivers, which makes it harder to help more students pass, said Jennifer Dounay Zinth, a senior policy analyst at the Education Commission of the States.

Twenty-six states currently require students to pass an exit exam before graduation, and other states use various examinations to determine whether a student should graduate. Zinth finds Minnesota’s system unusual and unfair.

“It’s sending the wrong message to students, parents, and adults in the district that students are ready for the next level after high school when students aren’t passing a test that’s supposed to indicate whether they’re ready,” she said.

The tests were created to help students compete with their national and international peers.

“Employers need the best talent they can find. If they can’t find it in Minnesota, they will go somewhere else,” Bartholomew noted.

Former Minnesota Education Commissioner Alice Seagren, who oversaw implementation of the tougher math standard, says waivers may no longer be necessary when the program expires in 2014. The student pass rate is increasing every year, she noted.

If Minnesota ends waivers and fewer students graduate, “you are going to have a lot of angry students and parents,” Zinth said. She recommends undertaking a system review to see why students can’t pass.

Emmaline Epperson (emmalineepperson@gmail.com) writes from Hillsdale, Michigan.
New Law in Louisiana Sparks Record Number of Charter School Applications

By Ashley Bateman

Groundbreaking Louisiana legislation has led to a boom in new charter school applications across the state.

The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) received 49 charter school applications in 2012, 26 of which were for new charters, more than five times the number of applications in 2011.

The jump in applications follows this year’s passage of Act 2, which allows people in failing school districts who wish to start a charter school to apply directly to BESE, bypassing school board approval. A streamlined approval process, announced in August, is expected to further expand charter school options among Louisiana districts.

“It’s consistent with where the state has been going,” said Kenneth Campbell, president of the Black Alliance for Educational Options and a former charter schools director for the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE). “A lot of people see an opportunity to really take responsibility for educating children. A lot of people have ideas, a process, a way to do things that is more successful.”

Charter schools are public schools given structural and regulatory freedom in exchange for sanctions and closure if their students do not perform well. Forty-one states allow charter schools.

Streamlining Approvals

Focusing applications on academically struggling districts and letting some applicants bypass the local school board has driven the application increase, said Sarah Baird, spokeswoman for the Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools. School boards have strong reasons to deny potential competitors access to students despite parent wishes.

Previously, a school board had to deny a charter request before its sponsors could apply to BESE. Now, potential charter operators in any district receiving a “D” or “F” grade from the state based on academic performance can go straight to BESE.

“We expect to see an increase in educational leaders stepping up and demanding alternative options for their students,” Baird said.

The state’s role has been transformed under state Superintendent John White, said Neerav Kingsland, chief strategy officer at New Schools New Orleans, a charter support nonprofit.

“Government’s gone from being an inhibitor to a partner in opening great schools,” Kingsland said.

Kingsland says he expects to see replications of New Orleans’ charter success in Baton Rouge and Jefferson County in the next three to five years.

“We want to replicate what happened in New Orleans across the state,” Kingsland said. “We don’t want this to be a Katrina-only story. This is what happens when you hand back power to local schools.”

Attracting Quality School Leaders

“The tension between maintaining quality and stifling innovation is a really tricky one in charter land,” Kingsland said. “You can go too far in opening and have a lot of schools underperform, and you can also go too tight and only the best schools are opening.”

With a speedier process and fewer regulations, local authorizers are requiring charters to meet rigorous criteria prior to approval.

The new process requires applicants to detail how they will run their school’s finances, curriculum, and operations, Baird said.

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Utah Parents Object to Common Core

By Abigail Wood

Parents and citizens have formed activist groups to oppose Utah’s adoption of Common Core education standards, though state officials including the governor and education department spokesmen say the objections are groundless.

Approximately 300 people packed a Salt Lake City auditorium for lectures on the standards, which describe what children should know in each grade for math and English. Forty-five states adopted the standards under Obama administration pressure.

Christal Swasey, a mom from Heber City, Utah, said she hadn’t even heard the term “Common Core” until April 2012—nearly two years after the state adopted it. “I think most parents in Utah still don’t know what the term means,” Swasey said. “Utah adopted the Core before the standards had been published—like getting married without dating.”

Parent activist Alisa Ellis didn’t know about the Common Core until a teacher, unable to explain the standards more than telling her they were “great,” handed her a brochure, Ellis said. “For a year I couldn’t find any answers,” she said.

These Utah moms are not alone. Sixty percent of U.S. voters polled in May said they have seen, read, or heard “nothing at all” about the standards. To rectify that in Utah, these moms and dozens of other parents founded Utahns Against Common Core. Other groups have composed brochures and begun approaching state lawmakers.

Cutting Classic Literature

The Common Core replaces literature with “informational” reading in large portions of many states’ curriculums.

“When I found out they are slashing classic literature I was really bothered,” Swasey said. “That’s like book burning. If you don’t allow the child access to the literature it is the same thing as saying the literature doesn’t exist.”

The standards also require students to take algebra in ninth grade instead of eighth. “My sixth grader is adept at math,” Ellis said. “It really bothers me that with the Common Core the only way for him to advance as his older siblings did is to skip a grade. I see value in him staying with his peers.”

Shifting the Curriculum

In addition to these practical issues, the Common Core is legally dubious, says Jim Stergios, executive director of the Pioneer Institute.

The federal government is paying for two state coalitions to develop tests aligned with the standards, but it is illegal for the federal government to develop curriculum.

“The people who develop these tests cannot develop tests without developing specific curriculum and instructing teachers how they should teach,” Stergios said.

The Pioneer Institute asked two former U.S. Education Department lawyers to analyze the laws that might enable the federal government’s involvement. They concluded its involvement with the Common Core was illegal, Stergios said.

“These two groups, funded by the federal government, specifically state they will develop curriculum,” he said.

Swasey says she too is concerned about the program. “It’s not a national curriculum, but it is a nationally controlled testing program and controlled standards. If you do that, you don’t need to control the curriculum,” she said.

Abigail Wood (awood@hillsdale.edu) writes from Hillsdale, Michigan.

U.S. Executive Order Promotes Race-Based School Discipline

By Casey Cheney

President Barack Obama has signed an executive order hiring more race-sensitive federal administrators to hold meetings and mandate racial discipline quotas in an effort to improve black students’ education outcomes.

The order charges his new council in part with “promoting a positive school climate that does not rely on methods that result in disparate use of disciplinary tools.”

A higher percentage of black students than white students receive school discipline such as suspensions or expulsion, the president noted.

A recent Civil Rights Project (CRP) study found 17.3 percent of black students were suspended in 2009–10, whereas 4.7 percent of white students and 7.3 percent of Latino students were. Only 2.1 percent of Asians were suspended that year.

Based on ‘Junk Science’

CRP recommends the federal government “step up federal civil rights enforcement to address the large disparities.”

But the disproportionate school discipline numbers don’t indicate racism as a central cause, said Walter Olson, a Cato Institute senior fellow.

“Kids who have had their lives disrupted in various ways are more likely to engage in misconduct,” Olson said. “Also, if you attend a school that already has a discipline problem, you are more likely to become a discipline problem.”

The president and CRP’s solutions rest on “junk science,” said Heather MacDonald, a Manhattan Institute fellow. School discipline policies ought to give school officials more authority instead of tying their hands and increasing expenses, she said.

“The idea that discipline is somehow happening capriciously is ridiculous,” she said.

Encouraging Unruly Behavior

The CRP report claims data show black students do not misbehave more than other students. While some personnel may unfairly discipline students of a particular race, disability, or gender, statistics cannot prove that, Olson said.

In the past, school districts pressured to reduce racial discipline disparities have attempted to “fix the numbers” by giving minority students a pass following behavior that would land other students in hot water, and by punishing students of “under-disciplined” races more harshly, he said. This combined with the administration’s anti-bullying regulations will make schools more unruly, Olson said.

“It’s a scary incentive to be arbitrarily harsher,” Olson said, “and to diverge from actually doing justice in the individual case. It should alarm parents.”

Casey Cheney (caseycheney@gmail.com) is a writer and graduate of Hillsdale College.
Study: Ohio Schools Can Do More with Less

By Katie Brunk
Ohio’s public schools, like many across the country, will soon have to learn to do more with less. A new study lays out a blueprint to maintain or improve their current performance, for a lot less money.

The study by KnowledgeWorks, a Cincinnati-based policy research organization, says schools could cut $1.4 billion, or 20 percent of current spending, by working together to share noninstructional services.

“Sharing services and creating cradle-to-career initiatives can benefit students by freeing up more dollars to provide academic and support services to improve outcomes and focusing dollars on activities that result in student academic success,” said Andrew Benson, executive director of Ohio Education Matters, a subsidiary of KnowledgeWorks.

Shared Services a Big Saver
The study, titled “Toward a New Model of Governance for Ohio,” was commissioned by then-governor Ted Strickland’s (D) administration in 2010. Despite the change of political party with the election of Gov. John Kasich (R) soon after, Benson and his team decided to continue the study because of 2011’s giant projected budget cut.

“We saw an opportunity to put innovation into the [school] system and to lower costs,” Benson said.

The study compared school districts with one another to find methods to improve efficiency and effectiveness.

“Cost-cutting within a district can only take school officials so far, and those costs often are self-defeating because they affect academic outcomes,” Benson said. “But states can encourage school districts to think and act differently, causing them to combine resources with other entities to make their own dollars go farther.”

Shared services have worked in the private sector with companies such as General Electric, Pfizer, and Ford. Applying it to schools could encompass departments such as human resources, accounting, transportation, and special education, among others.

“Shared services have worked in the private sector with companies such as General Electric, Pfizer, and Ford. Applying it to schools could encompass departments such as human resources, accounting, transportation, and special education, among others.”

Increasing Quality
Saving money does not mean reduced quality, the report concluded. It listed measures that can help ensure schools continue to perform at a certain standard while reducing costs. In fact, shared spending should increase education quality, the report stated.

Among those advantages, shared services present “great opportunities for digital and blended learning approaches,” noted Byron McCauley, KnowledgeWorks’ public relations director.

Ohio’s best example of shared services is Jon Ritchie, superintendent to three small districts. Ritchie initially took on the second district with no pay increase, and his contract was recently renewed for another five years. He has testified to Ohio’s legislature about how well the arrangement suits students and taxpayers.

“The ‘new normal’ in public education is having to meet higher expectations with fewer resources, so school districts must find ways to do more with less,” Benson said.

In Ohio, each budget or levy change requires voter approval, which can prove difficult. This November, with the expected increase in voter turnout due to the presidential election, Ohio schools will propose ballot initiatives for increasing shared services.

If successful, Benson said, legislators could add incentives to direct the money saved into classrooms.

Katie Brunk writes from Chicago, Illinois.

Detroit-Area District, in Emergency, Outsources Its 3 Schools

By Casey Cheney
Highland Park School District entered uncharted territory for Michigan, outsourcing its three schools to charter company Leona Group LLC starting this fall.

The summer announcement followed a January state audit and resulting appointment of an emergency manager.

“To my knowledge, this is untried in Michigan,” said Michael Atkins, Leona Group’s general counsel. He said for that to happen, the board must pay off all creditors except the state.

“It’s the Highland Park schools, and it needs to stay the Highland Park schools,” he said. “We’re getting them there. We’re very pro-public schools.”

Failed Management
Highland Park spent $16,500 per pupil in fiscal year 2011. Under charter control, per-pupil spending will be closer to $10,000.

“If it, in fact, does succeed, ... the school board will have to decide whether or not they want to retake control of the schools. [Their control] is a contributing factor in them having a large number of fiscal problems,” Van Beek said.

It will likely take 12 years before the school board can accomplish its goal of controlling Highland Park schools, said Michael Atkins, Leona Group’s general counsel. He said for that to happen, the board must pay off all creditors except the state.

Academic Paucity
The Leona Group promises not only financial but also academic redemption in one of the state’s worst-performing districts.

State standardized tests show 32.6 percent of Highland Park fourth-graders are proficient in reading and 13 percent proficient in math; the statewide averages are 67.7 percent and 39.9 percent, respectively. Eighth-grade students average 47.5 percent proficient in reading; the statewide average is 60.5 percent. In math, 5.2 percent of Highland Park eighth-graders are proficient, compared with 29.4 percent statewide.

A side effect of saving money while improving education is rehiring. The Leona Group typically hires back 70 percent of the staff at schools it enters, at smaller paychecks. Highland Park’s average teacher salary formerly was almost $65,000 a year, not including benefits. Leona Group teacher salaries average approximately $36,000.

Casey Cheney (caseycycheney@gmail.com) is a writer and graduate of Hillsdale College.
Facilities, Funding Are Central Obstacles for charters

By Ashley Bateman

Local school districts covetously control vacant school buildings across the nation while public charter schools struggle to house students as charter numbers grow in many districts.

The real estate crisis was ranked the number one external obstacle to charter growth by the National Charter School Research Project’s most recent survey. A new report explores the problem.

“In his report, [Nelson] Smith describes the relationship between charters and districts as ‘akin to that of landowner and sharecropper, since the charters have no statutory or contractual right to property.’”

Financier wariness about charters was legitimate when the concept was new, but no longer, Smith said. He cites research of 229 charter school loans showing only one default, a 1 percent foreclosure rate in the past decade, and a favorable corporate debt default rate.

“[Leasing to charters] is a political nightmare for a lot of school systems because if you have a district that is anti-charter, they see this as a means to prohibit charters,” said Himanshu Kothari, a financier who has studied private loans for public schools. Smith said passing early charter laws was such a struggle that “financing buildings was allowed to fall off the table.”

Even pro-charter states often do not know how poor their charter school financing and facilities laws are, said Ursula Wright, interim CEO of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

“If you don’t know there’s a problem you don’t take action,” she said. “The vast majority of states in the country are woefully under-serving the charters in their jurisdiction by not understanding the facilities issue.”

Best State Practices

California, Washington, DC, and Indiana currently have the most equitable charter facilities laws, Wright said. Provisions in these high-ranking jurisdictions include: state grant and loan programs for charter school facilities; equal access to tax-exempt bonds; an exclusive charter school bonding authority; a mechanism to provide increased borrowing credit for charter schools; and equal access to existing state facilities programs.

Indiana recently passed legislation requiring districts to share vacant or severely underused facilities with charters by either leasing or selling for $1 per year.

“That is pretty high stakes,” Wright said. Florida prohibits stricter facility requirements for charters than for traditional schools. A new Texas law provides bond guarantees for charters. Newark, New Jersey passed a law to lease unused district buildings to charter schools.

Entering a long-term real estate agreement with a charter remains risky for private investors because most charters do not have strong business models, Kothari said.

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

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Pennsylvania Considers Ending Property Taxes

By Mary Petrides Tillotson

Pennsylvania’s legislature is considering a measure that would end school property taxes and instead increase income and sales taxes to raise the $13 billion the state spends on K-12 schools.

“Whenever we’ve tested it, either in a town hall setting or just asking people to sign on to a petition or … scientific polling, it’s been very well received,” said state Sen. Dave Argall (R-Schuylkill), co-sponsor of Senate Bill 1400. “People just hate the school district property tax, and they’re really looking for a replacement.”

The measure would raise the state’s 3.07 percent income tax to 4 percent and make its sales tax apply to all retail items and increase it from 6 to 7 percent.

Every state taxes property. Some do not have sales, corporate, or income taxes. Pennsylvania’s property taxes are ninth-highest in the U.S., according to the Tax Foundation, a nonpartisan research organization. Many nearby states have even higher tax burdens, with New Jersey, New York, Ohio, and Maryland ranking among the biggest taxers in the country.

Constituent complaints prompted the bill, Argall said.

“They’re afraid they’ll lose their homes because of this property tax, and they just see that it’s incredibly inefficient,” he said.

The state Senate Finance Committee held a public hearing during which Sen. Mike Folmer (R-Lebanon County) said many Pennsylvanians are “renting their properties from school boards rather than owning their properties.”

Pennsylvania has considered similar measures for approximately 30 years.

Disentangle Schools, ZIP Codes?

America has funded schools from property taxes since its inception, said Robert Enlow, president of the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

“In the modern age, we should be thinking of new ways to fund schools,” he said.

Most property taxes connect school financing to houses, instead of to students and school performance, he said.

“Stop thinking about … the value of your home funding education. This isn’t about how much money schools get, it’s about how effectively they’re funded. If I ask you right now, ‘How much money should a school get?’ that answer is going to vary widely,” he said. “My personal opinion is it doesn’t matter what the school gets. It matters what the child gets.”

Root Problem: Spending

Shifting the method of taxing does nothing to stop the cost drivers of government education, said Priya Abraham, senior policy analyst at the Commonwealth Foundation for Public Policy Alternatives.

“If you’re going to create a different method of taxation for public education, we also think you need to put in place taxpayer protection on that to limit spending growth,” she said.

She recommended school choice as an antidote to toxic tax levels.

“Once you inject competition and [a] variety of choices parents can choose from for their kids, that improves standards and efficiency, and tends to decrease costs across the board,” she said.

Several other poor public policies have contributed to Pennsylvania’s $13,000 per-pupil spending, which makes its K-12 system the 11th-most expensive in the U.S., she said.

Pennsylvania’s prevailing wage law requires taxpayers to pay workers a government-mandated wage for government construction projects of at least $25,000. Collective bargaining agreements have inflated costs until they “far exceed what the market wage rate is for exactly the same labor and same scope,” Abraham said.

“On average, that’s inflating construction costs about 51 percent across Pennsylvania,” she said. “It’s difficult for schools to undertake renovations without unnecessarily inflating costs.”

Pensions are also straining school budgets, she said. Moving from a defined-benefit system to a defined-contribution system, more common in the private sector, “would be like getting the politics out of pensions,” she said, and reduce expenses.

Spending Restraint

“I’ve had people point out to me if we don’t control the spending, it doesn’t matter where the money comes from, whether it’s income tax, sales tax, property tax,” Argall said.

Lawmakers closed tax loopholes several years ago—some around 2004 and others around 2011—and put new laws in place “that essentially tell school districts that they cannot spend more than the rate of inflation without putting it on the ballot for voter approval,” he said.

“We’ve seen some data that it has helped to a certain degree,” he said.

Senators cosponsors Jeffrey Piccola (R-Dauphin County) and Jim Ferrl (D-Allegheny) and their staffs did not return multiple requests for comment.

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

Officials Plan Dramatic Restructure of Philadelphia Schools

By Vicki Alger

Local officials have released a plan to rebuild the long-struggling Philadelphia School District from the ground up.

“The current structure doesn’t work,” said School Reform Commission (SRC) Chairman Pedro Ramos. “It’s not fiscally sustainable, and it doesn’t produce high-quality schools for all kids.”

Insolvency, poor academic achievement, and safety concerns are primary reasons to act, he said.

The SRC’s reorganization plan would close 64 poorly performing schools over five years, starting with 40 schools in 2013; move thousands of students to charter schools; and replace the central district office with several decentralized “achievement networks” that compete to run schools and sign performance contracts.

“If we don’t close these schools, … we’re blowing about $33 million,” explained SRC Chief Recovery Officer Thomas Knudsen. “We can’t afford that.”

The current, 2013 district budget shortfall is $218 million. Left unchecked, it is projected to grow to $1.1 billion by 2017. Philadelphia is one of the lowest-performing school districts in the nation.

Vicki Alger, Ph.D. (heartlander@vickialger.com) is a senior fellow at the Independent Women’s Forum.
Older Investors Help Young Entrepreneurs Get Started

By Michal Conger

With the cost of college increasing exponentially over the past 40 years, most graduates begin adulthood thousands of dollars in debt.

A new investment platform called Upstart wants to give enterprising graduates a chance to pursue their entrepreneurial dreams instead of a “safe” job, and possibly relieve them of student debt.

That’s what Nathan Sharp, who graduated from Dartmouth College’s Tuck School of Business in 2012, chose.

Sharp wanted to start a company, but with school debts to pay, he hesitated to pursue a traditional business loan with its unforgiving interest and payback schedule.

Instead, as a member of Upstart’s pilot class this year, Sharp nabbed a personal investment from backers who will share in his good and bad years. That frees him to work on PayOrPass, an app that lets shoppers bid for products and frees him to work on PayOrPass, an app that lets shoppers bid for products and

The shared risk attracted Sharp to Upstart, which he said is “much more humane” than a traditional loan because it allows for some bad years.

“Historically, the most responsible thing for you to do if you had tons of student debt was to go straight into something that will help you pay off that debt. But that’s only because there was no other option,” he said.

Direct Investments in People

Upstart is unique in that investments are tied to each person, not their ideas, Upstart’s business development lead Jeff Keltner said.

Backers have a personal interest in seeing their upstarts succeed, which fosters mentoring as well as business relationships.

The mentorship has proved Upstart’s most valuable aspect for Omri Mor, who graduated this year from the University of Washington and turned down a “safe” job to start ZIIBRA, a music platform that helps new artists build audiences and bank accounts.

Upstart has helped Mor pay his expenses while he runs ZIIBRA, instead of depleting his savings. But Upstart’s “level of mentorship and support” has been even more valuable, he said.

Likelihood of Success

Some hesitate to endorse Upstart’s model because young entrepreneurs lack real-world business experience.

“Statistically, 40-year-olds are more likely than 20-year-olds to succeed,” Cato Institute Adjunct Scholar Arnold Kling said. “Professional investors know how to play the corporate governance game to protect their interests. Amateurs have a much harder time.”

Others say because young people are more willing to take risks, Upstart is an exciting alternative to the safe-but-boring job route.

“Given the economic uncertainty and poor labor market for recent college graduates, this demographic is more willing to explore non-traditional options since there are relatively few jobs for them,” said Jonathan Robe, administrative director of the Center for College Affordability and Productivity.

The Upstart model could become more common over the next few years, he said.

“I suspect that these types of investments will continue in the future and perhaps even grow even if the labor market rebounds strongly in the next couple of years,” Robe said.

Upstarts agree it’s not the path for everyone, but they are quick to recommend it. “It’s ideal for people going out of their way to pursue their passions at all costs,” Mor said.

Michal Conger (mconger@wshingtontimes.com) is a digital editor for Times247.

Unprecedented Number of Americans Choose Certificates

By Casey Harper

Americans are looking to certificates at an unprecedented rate as a quick, cost-effective way to better their wages and employment opportunities, a Georgetown University study reports.

The number of certificates awarded has increased more than 800 percent over the past 30 years, the study finds. In postsecondary education, the number of certificates awarded is now second only to bachelor’s degrees.

Certificates often can be obtained within a year, and certificate holders earn 20 percent more than high school graduates, according to the study.

“Employers now are looking for more validation that workers have the kind of skills that they want, rather than just picking a generic worker and training that person on the job,” said Stephen Rose, a report author.

Depending on the field of study, certificate holders can earn more than graduates with associate’s and even bachelor’s degrees. In computer/information services, for example, women with certificates earn more each year than 75 percent of females with an associate’s degree and more than 64 percent of women with a bachelor’s degree in the field.

Hispanic workers particularly benefit from certificates, earning 40 percent more than high-school-educated Hispanics, the study reports.

Casey Harper (casey.harper33@gmail.com) writes from Hillsdale, Michigan.
ACLU Sues Michigan, School District Over Students’ ‘Right to Read’

By Mary Petrides Tillotson

The American Civil Liberties Union has sued Michigan officials and a school district near Detroit, alleging they violated students’ “right to read” by providing abysmal instruction for decades.

The ACLU complaint alleges students in Highland Park School District “have been denied the instruction necessary to attain basic literacy skills and reading proficiency expected of all students by the State of Michigan.”

Michigan law requires schools to provide special assistance to students scoring below their grade level on a standardized reading test taken in fourth and seventh grades. That assistance should be “reasonably expected to enable the pupil to bring his or her reading skills to grade level within 12 months.” The law exempts students with special circumstances.

Abysmal Reading Ability
In Highland Park, 65 percent of fourth-graders and 75 percent of seventh-graders scored below proficient on the reading tests, and the lawsuit alleges they have not been given the required extra instruction.

The ACLU asked students to write what they would like to tell the state’s governor about the school, and it included the students’ answers in the complaint. A seventh-grade student wrote:

My name is [redacted] and you can make the school better by getting people to do the job that is paid for get a football team for the kids mybe a basketball team get a better teacher for the school get a lot of tachers.

The student spelled his own name incorrectly in the sample.

Listed as defendants are the district, the State of Michigan, the State Board of Education, the Michigan Department of Education, State Superintendent Michael Flanagan, and school district emergency manager Joyce Parker.

“I don’t believe that school choice is going to solve all our educational problems, but for a certain percentage of kids who really are trapped, it’ll make a difference.”

JOSH DUNN, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO-COLORADO SPRINGS

Poor Learning Conditions
The complaint charges the school facility is in poor condition, which also inhibits learning. The complaints include:

• Books are outdated, in bad condition, and few. Students must share textbooks during class and may not take them home. Students cannot check books out from the library.
• Classrooms have little or no heat, and students wear coats and gloves in the classroom during Michigan’s winters.
• Class sizes are too large for proper instruction. Many students in one seventh-grade class stood or sat on the floor as the classroom could not accommodate all 50 of them.
• Bathrooms and hallways are not kept clean or in good repair. Hallways are damp from leaks, and bathrooms are not stocked with paper. A homeless man lived and slept in the building without school officials noticing.
• Student records are poorly kept and not accessible to parents.

Converted to Charter
This fall, Highland Park schools will be run by Leona Group LLC, a charter company. The move to charter the schools generated controversy and came after a decline in enrollment and poor fiscal management.

“The lawsuit is not pro- or anti-charter. It’s not pro- or anti-union,” said Kary Moss, executive director of ACLU-Michigan. “We are representing the kids. We’re giving them voice.”

The suit’s main objective is to enforce state law requiring personalized instruction for the students, she said, but the ACLU also hopes to force administrators to improve the school building.

“The heat should be fixed. The kids should be able to take books home. They should clean the bathroom,” she said.

Gov. Rick Snyder (R) appointed Joyce Parker emergency manager of the district in May. In November, voters will have a chance to dismantle a new state law that allows the state to appoint a manager for financially failing municipalities and school boards.

Jan Ellis, spokeswoman for the Michigan Department of Education, said she could not comment on the lawsuit, but she noted financial assistance is available from the state and federal government for low-achieving schools, and the state can send consultants to help school officials find ways to improve.

Choice as Alternative
Adopting school choice could be more effective than taking legal action against the school, said Josh Dunn, an associate professor of political science at the University of Colorado-COLORADO SPRINGS.

“The best way to help parents is to empower them, so they can take some ownership of their child’s educational outcome,” he said. “I don’t believe that school choice is going to solve all our educational problems, but for a certain percentage of kids who really are trapped, it’ll make a difference.”

Courts are often a poor mechanism to implement meaningful reform, he said.

“I would certainly trust the superintendent of education in Michigan before I’d trust the state judge to know what’s better for these kids,” he said.

Lawsuit a ‘Baby Step’
The lawsuit is “a baby step on the road to school reform,” said attorney Maureen Martin, senior fellow for legal affairs at The Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News.

“The focus is on getting these kids help immediately so they can get on with lives hopefully more productive than they otherwise would have been,” she said.

She continued, “One cannot help but wonder, though, why school officials, who are supposedly dedicated to the children, would not have remedied these deficiencies without a lawsuit and why these students were [socially] promoted in the system and why their teachers still have jobs. Someone—hopefully [the] teachers and administrators [responsible]—should pay for this situation. Thanks to the lawsuit, though, it won’t be the children, I hope.”

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

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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 Nihad Bunar, University of Stockholm, Sweden
Dr. Liz Gordon, Pukeko Research Limited, New Zealand
Session Chair, Professor Robert Fox, University of Hawaii

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