North Carolina Overhauls K-12 Education

By Bailey Pritchett

Despite 13 weeks of teachers union protests, North Carolina passed into law a state budget that makes thousands of poor children eligible for vouchers, eliminates K-12 tenure, ends automatic pay increases for master's degrees, and creates an A–F public school grading system. It also adds $23 million to the state's $11 billion in annual education spending.

“If there's any way to tell if a budget is good, it's the teacher union's eagerness to sue over it,” said Terry Stoops, a senior analyst for the Raleigh-based John Locke Foundation.

Obamacare Costs Hit School Districts, Employees

By Evelyn B. Stacey

School districts across the country are digging through the details to see how the Affordable Care Act, known as Obamacare, will affect their budgets starting January 1, 2014. The law's mandates are causing schools to fire employees, reduce employee hours, and otherwise slash education spending.

"This is such a hardship because [part-time employees] would like to work more hours and have offered to waive medical insurance because often they have it through the other spouse. But that is not allowed under [the Affordable Care Act]."

SUSEN ZOBEL, PRESIDENT, GRANITE EDUCATION ASSOCIATION
North Carolina Passes Overhaul of K-12 Education

Continued from page 1

Hours after the $20.6 billion budget passed on July 26, the North Carolina Association of Educators threatened to pursue legal action over its elimination of tenure in favor of one-year contracts.

Two New Voucher Programs

North Carolina is now one of 13 states that offer K-12 vouchers, and one of nine that offer vouchers to special-needs students.

The special-needs voucher passed in a standalone bill in July. It will allocate up to $36,000 per student per year to families with special-needs students. It is estimated to cost up to $3.7 million this upcoming year. Average per-pupil spending for special-needs students in public schools is more than twice the amount of the voucher.

The low-income voucher, also known as an “opportunity scholarship,” will allocate up to $4,200 to each eligible student, up to $10 million total. The law aims to distribute vouchers to as many as 7,000 students in 2014–15. Families who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, those earning up to $43,568 a year, are eligible.

Protesting on ‘Moral Mondays’

For 13 weeks, NCAE held weekly protests at the General Assembly, calling the protests “Moral Mondays.” Although the legislature is out of session, police estimated more than 5,000 people protested the budget on Monday, August 5.

“Since North Carolina is a Right to Work state, the NCAE is weak when it comes to collective bargaining,” Stoops said. “But the membership is strong [politically].”

Tenure will be phased out by 2018. Stoops said most claims about eliminating teacher tenure have been “overblown.” He does not expect an increase in layoffs when the education reforms begin to take effect.

“I doubt we will see widespread firings because of tenure eliminations in North Carolina,” Stoops said. “I think this is going to affect a small group of teachers that have no business being in a classroom. Frankly, they’re doing a disservice by delivering low-quality instruction.”

Useless Degrees

Research consistently finds no connection between receiving a master’s degree and teacher quality, said Marguerite Roza of the Georgetown Public Policy Institute. Her research shows financial incentives to earn a master’s degree through union-supported automatic bonuses for the credential yield little improvement in the classroom.

“A lot of master’s degrees have nothing to do with what the teacher ends up teaching,” she said.

North Carolina teachers with master’s degree salaries will remain on that pay scale, but new public school teachers will no longer receive automatic pay increases for the degree.

“The research from the left and the right comes to the same conclusion,” Stoops said. “There is no connection between master’s degrees and performance. We need to reconstruct the way we pay teachers: pay on effectiveness, not credentials.”

The A–F Grading System

Although public schools have been publicly reviewed for several years, Stoops says the system did not mean much to parents.

“We have graded schools in the past by using esoteric terms that parents wouldn’t understand—like ‘school of progress’ or ‘school of distinction,’” he said. “These terms are meaningless.”

Replacing confusing terms with an A–F grading system will serve the same function as the previous grading system, but in simpler terms taxpayers will understand, he said. The grading system will account for student performance and growth that will be quantifiable through standardized tests.

Private schools will not be subject to A–F grades.

“The philosophy is that there are two different ways to hold a school accountable,” Stoops said. “You can hold them accountable through tests and grades, or you can hold them accountable through parents. The idea is that parents will hold schools accountable for performance.”

‘Historic Year’ for Reform

In 2013–14, a legislative report estimates state K-12 spending will top $7.6 billion, more than 4 percent above last year.

Although the state’s budget typically allocates more than one-third of its funds to K-12 education, North Carolina ranks 48th in the country for K-12 per-pupil spending.

“The budget and reforms that passed [are] a win for parents,” said Stoops. “I don’t think it would be an exaggeration to say this year will be a historic year for education reform.”

For more than 100 years, Democrats ran North Carolina’s legislature and resisted school choice, Stoops said. But in 2010, Republicans won the majority in both legislative houses. Two years later, North Carolina elected its first Republican governor in 20 years.

“If you would have told me in 2009 that North Carolina would pass two voucher programs and charter school reforms, I would have laughed and dismissed it,” Stoops said. “In the span of two years, there has been complete reform. That’s why I say, ‘Never say never.’”

Obamacare Costs Hit School Districts, Employees

Continued from page 1

will be driven by the size of the cost increases—something that we will not know until they unfold over the next few years," said Michael Shires, a professor of public finance at Pepperdine University.

He continued, "One of the lessons the current federal fiscal crisis and the deficits in most states has taught us is that there really are limits to the resources available to public budgets. So, as the costs per employee rise, that money has to come from somewhere. So whether it is through larger class sizes, a smaller number of aides and support staff, or fewer books and other materials, there will likely be a decline in resources in the classrooms."

By January, all districts with 50 or more full-time employees must provide government-approved health care benefits. One significant change for schools is the new definition for full-time employees: Those who work an average of 30 hours or more per week. Previously, part-time work meant less than 40 hours per week. School districts unable to afford health care benefits for part-time employees are reducing the number of hours they can work.

Several national organizations contacted for this article said they had no statistics indicating how widespread are Obamacare’s financial effects on schools, but news articles about the trend are surfacing nationwide, most indicating significant cuts resulting from the new law.

Case Studies

Ohio’s Youngstown School District sent letters notifying more than 300 part-time employees their hours will be cut. In Pennsylvania, part-time employees will be limited to 29.5 hours of work per week. Fort Wayne schools in Indiana recently notified all 610 part-timers they now must work no more than 25 hours a week.

Granite School District in Utah has estimated providing Obamacare insurance for all part-time employees in 2013–14 will cost nearly $14 million. Its annual budget is about $500 million.

"[A]s the costs per employee rise, that money has to come from somewhere. So whether it is through larger class sizes, a smaller number of aides and support staff, or fewer books and other materials, there will likely be a decline in resources in the classrooms.”

MICHAEL SHIRES
PROFESSOR OF PUBLIC FINANCE, PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

“Such a Hardship”

Before Obamacare, part-time employees typically did not receive medical insurance, but they were allowed to work and earn more money per week, with "some working 32-plus hours as they chose," said Susen Zobel, president of the Granite Education Association, a local union. "The only realistic choice our district, and other employers, is given for this employee group was to cut the number of hours they were able to work. This is such a hardship because they would like to work more hours and have offered to waive medical insurance because often they have it through the other spouse. But that is not allowed under ACA."

Most of these part-timers “are not career employees” like teachers, Horseley said. Instead, they are classroom aides or janitors.

Layoffs a Real Possibility

“All have the opportunity to apply for full-time contract positions, which turn over pretty regularly,” he said. But if “we were required to provide them with benefits, services at schools would be impacted and the board would have to decide how to pay for those benefits. That situation would require some layoffs.”

To temporarily ease these challenges, Utah state Rep. Melvin Brown (R-Coalville) sponsored a bill this year to provide a one-time school funding increase of $160 million for 2013–14.

“The biggest problem facing all districts in our state is the fact that this also applies to substitute teachers,” Zobel said. “Now they can only work three-and-a-half days a week. This causes us to split subs for long-term situations, such as my friend that was diagnosed with brain cancer in January. Instead of only having to worry about one sub covering her class, she had to work with two subs to have her classes covered.”

Research shows use of more substitute teachers reduces student learning.

Higher Costs All Around

In addition to the cost of covering more employees, the Obamacare law will increase health insurance premium costs by an estimated 13 to 23 percent, according to analyses by WellPoint Inc., Hoover Institution Senior Fellow Daniel Kessler said.

“Employers have to pay a tax penalty because their policies do not carry sufficiently generous insurance," likely resulting in lower wages for employees, Kessler said.

Obamacare creates additional confusion for districts in determining whether they count as a small or large employer. The IRS requires a count of full-time employees plus the cumulative number of hours part-time employees work, which could add more full-time employee equivalents.

Many school districts have yet to decide how to deal with the issue. In the coming months, school boards will be discussing the law’s budget impacts in public meetings across the country.

Evelyn B. Stacey (ebstacey@yahoo.com) is a research assistant at the Hoover Institution. She writes from Palo Alto, California.
Indiana Holds Hearing on Common Core ‘Pause’

By Joy Pullmann

Another packed room awaited Indiana lawmakers reviewing Common Core national standards on August 5, with people lining the walls, ringing the star-studded hearing room floor, and filling the upper gallery.

The five-hour meeting was the first of three lawmakers will conduct before another three by the state board of education. In between, accountants will estimate the costs of overhauling Indiana’s education system to fit national goals and tests for English and math in grades K-12. By July 2014, the state board of education will decide whether Indiana improves its own standards or sticks with Common Core.

“I have no preconceived notion as to what will come to adoption in 2014,” state Superintendent Glenda Ritz told lawmakers. She criticized Common Core in math, but said “the process will decide” whether Indiana chooses Common Core with or without amendments, or updates its previous standards.

Indiana is the first state to reconsider the national project after public outcry led to a spring law requiring the current analyses. Hoosiers complained the state had not estimated the costs of Common Core, vetted its quality beside Indiana’s well-respected previous standards, or investigated the implications of signing contracts with federally funded national testing groups.

Ritz noted the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) did not request public input when the state board was considering Common Core, but “it’s not required anywhere for the department to do that.”

Academic Quality
The August 5 hearing focused on academic quality. Those testifying on both sides cited a comparison of Indiana’s standards to Common Core by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

Indiana’s previous standards “were commonly regarded as being among the best,” said Jason Zimba, one of Common Core’s lead math writers. “During development of Common Core Indiana standards were often out on my desk.” The Fordham review showed Indiana’s math standards “too close to call” in comparison with Common Core, but it did not consider career preparation, where Zimba said Common Core was better.

The institute sent Kathleen Porter-Magee to testify for the standards. She said its review found Common Core better than Indiana’s standards in English. That’s not true, said Common Core committee member Sandra Stotsky, who spoke against the national standards. She quoted the review: “Indiana’s standards are clearer, more thorough, [and] easier to read than the Common Core standards.” Fordham found Indiana’s standards were grouped more logically, included better examples, and had a better reading list, she said.

The Fordham math reviewer “told me and others directly that Indiana would be much better off keeping its old math standards and not going with Common Core,” testified Bill Evers, a fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution, to quickly hushed audience applause.

Remediation Concerns
Lawmakers and those testifying frequently discussed Indiana’s high college remediation rates.

“One of the things that is most disturbing is the number of students who have AP Calculus on their transcripts and come into remedial math classes,” said Chris Rock, a math and education professor at Manchester University.

Lawmakers quizzed Stotsky for a half hour after her 20-minute testimony, with questions ranging from over-testing fears to remediation.

“We have elementary teachers that have not been trained in math and science and history,” she said, when asked why Indiana graduates need so much college remediation if the state has high expectations for them. “We have a society with many distractions, and the amount of reading students do in and out of school has declined. Students are doing other things with their free time. There are multiple causes for needing remediation at the high school and post-high school level.”

Nonfiction vs. Fiction
Common Core requires children to read more nonfiction. Porter-Magee said this would increase children’s vocabulary and subject knowledge. Stotsky said research shows analyzing fiction develops children’s minds better than nonfiction, and this is why English teachers are trained to teach literature.

State Rep. Rhonda Rhoads (R-Harrison County) mentioned her time as a kindergarten teacher, where bringing nonfiction materials into the classroom often meant “trying to sell our students on an agenda or a product and not stopping to think, ‘What is the purpose of this information?’”

“The floodgates have been opened by this requirement for informational text,” Stotsky replied. “What many of us would consider classical literary texts were already disappearing from the classroom. Common Core doesn’t address the problem—it sets up another problem.”

Common Core also mistrates the texts on its recommended reading list, noted Terrence Moore, a Hillsdale College history professor.

Common Core recommends students read only the Bill of Rights, never the entire U.S. Constitution, he noted. Instead, it recommends a book that describes the Constitution using ‘words such as ‘vicious,’ ‘master class,’ ‘camouflaged,’ and ‘ugly,’” he said. “Students’ first encounter with the Constitution will be this negative document. ... Yet we don’t have Common Core directing us to Federalist 10 or 51, but a highly segmented [book] from [a] modern scholar with questionable language.”

What’s Next
The pause law means Indiana will keep its current state tests, the ISTEP+, until 2015–16.

“However those [standards] look, the job becomes finding and developing assessments that align with them,” Ritz said. “I’m committed to having standards and assessments, and vendors will do what we would like them to do for the state of Indiana.”

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is a research fellow of The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
Florida School Choice Program to Grow 25 Percent

By Mary C. Tillotson

Funds for Florida’s K-12 tax-credit scholarships will expand by another 25 percent in the 2013–14 school year, thanks to the popularity of private school choice among poor families.

About 61,000 low-income students are receiving scholarships to attend private schools this fall through the program, said Jon East, a vice president at Step Up for Students, the nonprofit that administers it. About 2.7 million students attend Florida public schools, and about half qualify for the scholarships.

About 94,000 students applied before the June cutoff this year, and East said he expects another long waiting list for next year: “We see on the horizon the day when all students who want to have those sorts of options will have [them], and the waiting list will be eliminated.”

Funded by Private Donations

Donations from businesses, which receive dollar-for-dollar tax credits, fund the program. For 2013–14, the statewide tax credit cap is $286 million. If donations reach at least 90 percent of the cap, it automatically increases by 25 percent the following year.

Students whose families earn up to 185 percent of the federal poverty level, or $43,500 for a family of four, are eligible.

“Students who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds have greater challenges. They always have, so it’s tougher for them to be successful in school,” East said. “There tend to be fewer alternatives or options for these kids.”

Any participating school that receives more than $250,000 in scholarship money must have a certified public accountant file a financial report each year, and students in third through 10th grade must take a nationally recognized test.

“The state pays attention to what the private schools are doing,” said David Figlio, director of the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University, who has studied the Step Up program for several years.

Opening Opportunities

At Bhaktivedanta Academy in Alachua, Florida, about 30 percent of the students attend on a Step Up scholarship.

“We have many families that, under normal circumstances, an education with us wouldn’t be possible without the program,” said David Aguilera, head of the school.

Many parents send their children to Bhaktivedanta because it offers a holistic approach to education, including religious and social formation, Aguilera said. The school has a strong Hindu population, but Bhaktivedanta is the only Hindu school nearby, Aguilera said.

Annual tuition ranges from $4,375 for half-day pre-kindergarten to $6,150 for middle school, according to the school’s Web site. Step Up for Students can cover up to $4,335 in private tuition or $500 in transportation costs for students to attend a public school in another district.

Helps Neediest Children

The program attracts mostly struggling students in struggling schools, Figlio said, rather than emptying public schools of “the best and the brightest” as some charge.

The average household income for scholarship students was 6 percent above the poverty level, East said. More than half (54 percent) of the students live in single-parent households, and more than two-thirds are black or Hispanic.

“The makeup of this program speaks to educational need and speaks to people who have certain challenges related to economic challenges within their household,” East said.

As a result of the scholarships, public school test scores are improving modestly, but the program is not revolutionizing education, Figlio said.

“At the end of the day, what do we see with this program?” Figlio said. “It seems like it’s been moderately beneficial, and I don’t really see any losers.”

‘All Hands on Deck’

In addition to the 51,000 students served through Step Up last year, 200,000 Florida students enrolled in charter schools and 27,000 received vouchers for students with learning disabilities, East said.

“There was a great deal of hostility when the program was passed in 2001, but they’ve now had 12 years to see that this isn’t a competitor to the public school system; it’s a partner,” East said.

More public school employees are beginning to say, “Wait a minute. It’s all hands on deck for low-income students,’ and we need everyone to roll up their sleeves and help,” he said.

Mary Petrides Tillotson (mary.c.tillotson@gmail.com) is an education reporter for Watchdog.org.

Giving Parents Power

Lots of people talk about school reform, but how much change actually occurs?

Here’s an idea that has promise: the Parent Trigger.
If a majority of parents and guardians of children at a particular school sign a petition demanding reform, then the school district must do as the parents ask.

This Policy Brief looks at the Parent Trigger laws already in place and how they have worked in practice, and it offers suggestions to parents and elected officials for crafting their own legislation.

THE PARENT TRIGGER:
JUSTIFICATION AND DESIGN GUIDELINES
BY JOSEPH L. BAST AND JOY PULLMANN
OCTOBER 2012, 48PP, $7.95

Free download at heartland.org
For more information about the Parent Trigger, visit theparenttrigger.com

By Mary C. Tillotson

“Funds for Florida’s K-12 tax-credit scholarships will expand by another 25 percent in the 2013–14 school year, thanks to the popularity of private school choice among poor families.”
Louisiana Sets New Course for High School Classes

By Evelyn B. Stacey

Louisiana is pioneering a new way to conduct high school classes, and it’s so popular state leaders are scrambling to keep up with demand.

In 2012, legislators established the Course Choice program. It’s like a mini-voucher that lets students choose individual classes outside their schools.

“The goal of the Course Choice pilot program is to expand students’ access to a wide variety of courses and develop courses that are tied to postsecondary success directly,” explained Barry Landry, a spokesman for the Louisiana Department of Education. “Louisiana is the first state in the nation to implement such a system.”

In 2013, Florida’s legislature considered a similar program. That bill’s author promises he’ll revive the idea in 2014.

Course Choice adds a variety of options, including workplace-based apprenticeships, typically unavailable through many high schools. Originally, the program was to start with 2,000 students, but so many applied to use Course Choice nearly 3,000 now have joined the program, and state Superintendent John White is trying to squeeze money from other budgets to let them in. He already did that to create the program’s registration Web site. The average course costs $700 to $1,000 per student.

“This is a very important step to a larger school choice system. It increases the range of options exponentially, and it has something to offer to a very broad and diverse range of students,” said Kevin Kane, president of the Pelican Institute, a state-based free-market think tank.

Funding Battles

Originally, the state’s general education fund, the Minimum Foundation Program (MFP), funded Course Choice. The state supreme court ruled that unconstitutional, shrinking the program back to a pilot with funding through a block grant.

“The funding mechanism used is unconstitutional,” said Les Landon, spokesman for the Louisiana Federation of Teachers, the LFT, Louisiana Association of Educators, and Louisiana School Boards Association sued Course Choice and the state’s expansive voucher program. In May the court ruled, “once funds are dedicated to the state’s Minimum Foundation Program for public education, the constitution prohibits those funds from being expended on the tuition costs of nonpublic schools and nonpublic entities.”

“Student demand for these courses has reached a point where it cannot be ignored. We are going to have to make some sacrifices to make sure these students receive courses they need ...”

BARRY LANDRY
LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

“Teachers are concerned that anything that drains resources away is hurting our schools—basically it’s a way to fund hedge fund managers,” said Landon. “We think that it is an unnecessary distraction from necessary education programs and it is very poorly put together.”

“Of course in any program you will find bad actors, so such scenarios may play out from time to time,” Kane said. “But the concept is sound, and most people who learn of it find much to applaud.”

Course providers are paid in part when students begin their classes and receive the remainder when students complete them. Kane noted the reform idea doesn’t require creating new schools or increasing transportation costs.

“Student demand for these courses has reached a point where it cannot be ignored,” Landry said. “We are going to have to make some sacrifices to make sure these students receive courses they need to be prepared for college or career.”

Evelyn B. Stacey (ebstacey@yahoo.com) is a research assistant at the Hoover Institution. She writes from Palo Alto, California.
Parents will have ultimate control over their child’s education dollars when states move existing school choice programs into education savings accounts, says a new report.

“This is, I believe, the future of how we finance K-12 education, and I am hopeful that we will see more states move in this direction,” said Lindsey Burke, an education fellow at The Heritage Foundation and coauthor of the report.

Arizona pioneered education savings accounts (ESAs) in 2011. Up to 90 percent of a child’s state per-pupil funding is deposited into an account with a debit card parents can use to purchase a wide array of education materials: books, tutoring, online and in-person classes, and more. Students with special needs receive larger ESA deposits.

“The accounts allow a parent to direct their child’s educational experience in a totally customized manner. That’s a very liberating concept in K-12 education,” Burke said.

Burke and Jonathan Butcher wrote “Expanding Education Choices: From Vouchers and Tax Credits to Savings Accounts” to explain how states can switch existing vouchers and scholarship tax credits into ESAs.

The report profiles the Visser and Locke families. Jordan Visser has cerebral palsy, while Kasey Locke is autistic. Both families use their children’s ESAs to provide specialized education opportunities not available through the state’s traditional K-12 system.

Kathy Visser uses Jordan’s ESA to pay for a special-needs private school, physical therapist, and therapeutic horseback riding classes. She says the latter have greatly improved Jordan’s balance. The Lockes use Kasey’s ESA for a private school specializing in a behavioral technique that helps her thrive, which her traditional school couldn’t incorporate.

“Parents are still unable to make private school an efficient choice with a voucher,” said Butcher, education director at the Goldwater Institute. “ESAs incentivize private schools to set their tuition at what is market value for some families. In this way, families don’t spend the whole of their ESA on tuition, [and they] can go on to meet the unique needs of the child with other situations.”

Approximately 200,000 Arizona children are eligible for ESAs. To join, children must have special needs, reside in military families, be foster children, or be zoned into a D- or F-rated public school. Arizona parents sign a contract promising to provide their child education in reading, grammar, mathematics, social studies, and science. Families also promise not to enroll their child in a public school full-time. ESAs for non-special-needs children are worth up to $6,000, approximately two-thirds what taxpayers pay for public-school students.

“State legislators often feel they must work at the state level to create a blanket law ... to reform education for everyone,” Butcher says. “We need to help individual kids, not prop up a system. ESAs do just that.”

Jenni White is cofounder of Restore Oklahoma Public Education and a former public school science teacher.
3rd ANNUAL
INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL CHOICE & REFORM ACADEMIC CONFERENCE

Gallery One Doubletree, Fort Lauderdale, Florida USA
Friday, January 17 through Monday, January 20, 2014

CALL FOR PROPOSALS

Submit your proposal for a paper session or symposia.

The international character of school choice in the twenty-first century is a key focus of the conference. Presenters will address issues surrounding charter schools, independent schools, magnet schools, virtual schools and private school choice in its many forms on an international, comparative basis. Paper/session submissions emphasizing international studies are welcomed and particularly encouraged. Presenters traveling overseas will receive travel subsidies.

Submit your proposal for a paper session or symposia today.
http://nieomarketreplace.com/scrc14-presentation-proposal/

KEY ISSUE SPEAKERS

ROD PAIGE
Rod Paige is a life-long educator and served as U.S. Secretary of Education from 2001 to 2005. As Secretary, Paige was an unstinting advocate of student achievement, employing “best of breed” solutions to achieve results towards the Department’s goal of raising national standards of educational excellence.

ALEJANDRA MIZALA
Alejandra Mizala holds an economics degree from the University of Chile and a PhD in economics from the University of California, Berkeley. She is Professor at the University of Chile with the Centro de Economía Aplicada (Center for Applied Economics), Department of Industrial Engineering. She has written articles, chapters in books and a book on a range of subjects including educational policies and Latin American labor markets.

JOHN F. WITTE
John F. Witte is the founding Dean at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan. His research interests include policy analysis, democratic theory, with specialties in education and tax policy and politics with current research on charter schools, open enrollment, and a longitudinal study (through 2012) of the Milwaukee voucher program.

WHO SHOULD ATTEND
Researchers, scholars, k-12 policymakers, and practitioners interested in research related to school choice and reform of primary and secondary education.

BENEFITS TO YOU
• Get the latest research in the areas of school choice and school reform.
• Dynamic speakers and presenters.
• Extensive networking opportunities.

To submit a proposal or for more event information visit:
www.fischlerschool.nova.edu/nieo
N.C. Cuts Teacher Certification Requirements for Charters

By Haley Stauss

North Carolina Gov. Pat McCrory signed legislation that allows charter schools to hire more elementary-level teachers without teaching certificates.

The new law decreases the proportion of required elementary charter school teachers with teacher certification from 75 percent to 50 percent. That rate was revised several times through the legislative process, until a last-minute request by the governor brought the final number from 25 percent to 50 percent for all K-12 charter school teachers. It remains at 75 percent for high school teachers.

The change stems from the ideas that non-licensed people can make excellent teachers and charter schools are an appropriate place to try out innovative ideas, said bill author and state Sen. Jerry Tillman (R-Randolph). As one example, he cited an engineer neighbor who wanted to teach but didn’t want to spend time or money fulfilling certification requirements.

“The assumption is that a licensed teacher is a good teacher, but there is no evidence for that. In fact, most research shows little relationship between licensure and performance,” said Terry Stoops, director of education studies for the John Locke Foundation in Raleigh.

He continued, “The reason that education schools are not producing quality teachers is the curriculum is highly focused on methodology and theory, rather than subject matter. It does not require that elementary school teachers learn the science of reading or know math. It does not require high school teachers to know a lot of content on their subjects.”

The Certification Debate

Teach for America teachers with only six weeks of teacher training outperform teachers who receive four years of teacher education, a recent University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill study found.

“I would rather see teacher education programs improved rather than remove licensure requirements altogether,” said Matthew Ellinwood, a policy analyst at the North Carolina Justice Center. “Teaching schools should help teachers become masters of their own subject area, as well as to know how to teach. State certification should be tied to teacher performance.”

North Carolina’s legislature has tried to increase teacher licensing requirements with no success, said Jane Shaw, president of the John W. Pope Center for Higher Education Policy in Raleigh.

“So many brilliant people have tried to improve the education schools and failed that I am somewhat despairing,” she said. “The best thing to do is to bring in competition—as the charter school change will to a small extent—and to create genuine alternative pathways for licensing.”

Ellinwood suggests paying teachers more to attract higher-quality applicants and making the teaching profession somewhere more people want to stay. In the 2008–09 school year, the most recent year for which data are available, only 16 percent of North Carolina teachers who quit teaching said they were retiring.

Stoops, Ellinwood, and Shaw agreed on one thing: Higher-quality teachers mean higher-quality education.

Haley Stauss writes from Sacramento, California.

PODCAST INFO

Dan Coupland: Ending the Teacher Certification Game: http://news.heartland.org/podcasts/2012/09/06/dan-coupland-ending-teacher-certification-game

INVEST IN FREEDOM

INCLUDE THE HEARTLAND INSTITUTE IN YOUR ESTATE PLAN

One way to ensure free-market ideas are effectively promoted in the future is to name The Heartland Institute a beneficiary of your estate. You may designate a dollar amount or a percentage of your estate, or name Heartland a beneficiary of your insurance policy, retirement plan, IRA, bank or brokerage account, real estate, or other financial assets.

Many legacy gifts are easy to make and do not require legal assistance. For those that do, Heartland has legal advisors willing to help.

For sample bequest language or for further information please contact Mark Sulkin, Director of Development, or Gwendalyn Carver, Donor Relations Manager, at 312/377-4000 or by email at msulkin@heartland.org or gcarver@heartland.org.

The Heartland Institute One South Wacker Drive #2740 Chicago, IL 60606

The Heartland Institute is tax-exempt under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Its federal tax identification number is 36-3309812.
Pearson-Taught Students May Be Getting an Unfair Testing Advantage

By Evelyn B. Stacey

The largest education company in the world put reading passages from its new Common Core-aligned curriculum in the sixth- and eighth-grade tests it administered in New York, prompting concerns that schools using Pearson materials gained a testing advantage over those that did not.

This is the first year of New York’s new Common Core-aligned statewide tests and year two of education company Pearson’s five-year, $32 million contract to provide grade 3–8 assessments in English language arts and math, “making it the first year this specific overlap between a Pearson Common Core curriculum and a Pearson Common Core-aligned assessment could have existed,” said Kathleen Porter-Magee, a fellow at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. “It’s less likely that this kind of passage duplication happened in the past.”

Common Core is a set of national math and English requirements for grades K-12 that 45 states, including New York, have adopted. National tests corresponding to the standards will come out in 2014–15. Between now and then, several states are administering new, interim tests to prepare for the change.

‘Authentic’ Reading Passages

Until now, most test developers have written passages specifically for tests, which wouldn’t be reprinted in curriculum or other materials, Porter-Magee said. But Pearson sought to use “authentic passages,” selections from books and other already existing materials, in aligning New York’s new assessment to Common Core, she said.

“By definition, authentic texts have been published elsewhere,” said Tom Dunn, a New York Department of Education spokesman. “It is not surprising that a passage on the assessments may have appeared elsewhere in a textbook, and it is likely to happen again as we go forward with the use of authentic texts in state assessments.”

In November, the department posted online test guides that mentioned potential overlap between authentic passages and classroom materials.

“The move to using authentic texts allows for the inclusion of works of literature that are worthy of reading outside of an assessment context,” said Dunn. “The use of authentic, meaningful texts may mean that some texts are more emotionally charged or may use language outside of a student’s particular cultural experience.”

As for the forthcoming national tests, they too will use “authentic texts” but probably won’t have the exact same passages as particular curricula.

“Our passages might range from about 300–500 words for elementary grades. The likelihood that passages of that length would also appear in classroom activities is pretty slight,” said Joe Willhoft, executive director of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, one of two groups developing the national tests. “Most state-level tests now being used have a preference for ‘permissioned’ text rather than ‘commissioned’ text.”

Herding the Market

Using authentic assessments “is a big step forward,” Porter-Magee agrees, but it requires a more critical look at “the overlap between assessment and curriculum development.” As she wrote on Fordham’s blog, “If you were a New York principal and learned that Pearson included passages from their curriculum on the state test— the results of which are used to inform everything from student to teacher to school accountability—whose curriculum would you buy?”

State lawmakers have so far refused to address this question, and several turned down inquiries for this story. But parents and school leaders have questioned the use of the reprinted passages and their implications for open curriculum selection.

“It is possible that teachers have selected the same texts for use in their classrooms, and students may have read the books that passages were drawn from in their personal reading,” said Dunn. “While all assessments will include appropriate texts, please be aware that authentic texts will likely prompt real responses—perhaps even strong disagreement—among students. Students need to be prepared to respond accordingly while engaging with the test. The alternative would be to exclude many authors and texts that are capable of supporting the rigorous analysis called for by the Common Core.”

Evelyn B. Stacey (ebstacey@yahoo.com) is a research assistant at the Hoover Institution. She writes from Palo Alto, California.

Missouri Adopts Special-Needs Grants

By Loren Heal

Missouri has a new law administering scholarships for families with autistic children, giving them access to services from private facilities or public schools outside their district.

An early version of the bill would have let parents choose where to spend their dollars. The version of Senate Bill 17 Gov. Jay Nixon (D) signed allows only the state to distribute private and federal grants.

Bill sponsor state Rep. Dwight Scharnhorst (R-Manchester) said the bill was altered during the legislative process to restrict it to federal grants instead of letting parents use their own state money or tax-refundable private donations, as with a true school choice program. “It will [likely] still be tax money,” he said.

“There is no tax credit for these donations. This is not a tax-credit scholarship program and should not be considered an expansion of school choice,” said James Shuls, a Show-Me Institute education analyst.

Ten states offer some school choice for children with special needs, either through vouchers or tax-credit scholarships, which are funded by tax-deductible donations to K-12 scholarship funds.

“I’m going to try to augment that federal grant money with private foundation money if possible,” Scharnhorst said.

Loren Heal (loren.heal@gmail.com) is a research programmer at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a reporter for The Heartland Institute.
Georgia Rejects Common Core Tests Due to Costs

By Bailey Pritchett

Testing costs have removed Georgia from the list of states that will administer PARCC, one of the two national Common Core tests, the state Department of Education announced.

The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC, measures by standards different from Georgia’s current assessment, the Criterion-Reference Competency Test (CRCT). To administer the latter, five-subject assessment, Georgia taxpayers pay $8–$9 per student each year. Projections released in late July said administering the two-subject PARCC test would cost Georgians $29.50 per student.

“The whole [PARCC] test is going to collapse in a heap. I think about every state has better standards than Common Core. I would be surprised if Georgia stayed with it.”

JANE ROBBINS SENIOR FELLOW AMERICAN PRINCIPLES PROJECT

Ballooning Costs

Because PARCC evaluates only English and mathematics, Georgia plans to administer additional exams created by the state on history, science, and social studies. The state’s current assessment budget is $25 million. The projected cost of PARCC alone would be more than twice that amount.

“It’s not a case of standards,” said Georgia Department of Education spokesman Matt Cardoza. “[Common Core] standards are not terribly different than our standards now. One of the concerns we’ve had from the very beginning is cost.”

Cardoza said Georgia had been working with a few states to develop a “Plan B” in the event they can’t afford PARCC. The July 22 announcement said Georgia will develop its own Common Core tests.

“Georgia can create an equally rigorous measurement without the high costs associated with this particular test,” said Gov. Nathan Deal (R) in a statement.

PARCC tests also would cost taxpayers more through the technology they require, since PARCC tests will be all-online, Barge noted.

“A majority of our districts are not ready for full-scale, online assessments across all grades,” Barge wrote. “The state does not currently have the technology infrastructure or sufficient hardware to handle the test administration demands of PARCC.”

The state Department of Education also promised its tests would be shorter than the 10-hour tests PARCC plans to administer four times a year.

‘Worst Stewardship’

In 2010, Georgia was awarded a $400 million Race to the Top Grant to fund education changes over four years. One change it committed to during that process was national Common Core standards and tests.

“The deadline [for the grant application] was so quick, states were not given time to consider what [Common Core] would cost,” Robbins said. “They wanted to hear back quickly before anyone could back out. We bought this thing without thinking how much we could pay for it.”

Georgia’s annual education budget is approximately $13 billion. Robbins says adopting Common Core was not worth the Race to the Top grant since the latter will not even cover the expenses to administer the standards and tests.

“This is the most appallingly worst stewardship of Georgia taxpayer money that I can recall,” Robbins said. “This is a classic example of short-term thinking. They were desperate for the money because of a deep recession. They didn’t think it through.”

Robbins says it is unlikely the federal government will demand the grant money back because Georgia dropped PARCC tests. Half of it is already spent, and such a demand would be bad politics.

“Requiring states to return the money would hurt the government,” she said. “It would prove what they said is not a federal thing is actually a federally coerced scheme.”

Fifteen states must remain in PARCC to retain the $186 million federal grant that sustains it.

Bill sponsor state Sen. Kevin Bryant (R-Columbia) called it “a very small step.” But “it is a positive step to assist families with exceptional-needs children in that it gives them a choice,” he said.

School choice proposals have failed to pass in South Carolina although introduced every year for more than a decade. This year was the first time one reached the Senate floor for debate.

The Republican-dominated Senate voted 23–18 to table a proposal allowing deductions for parents and those who donate to private K-12 scholarships.

South Carolina Passes Temporary Education Tax Credits

By Alicia Constant

Although a $39 million education tax credit proposal failed to pass the South Carolina Senate this May, senators amended the state budget to grant tax deductions for private school teachers and learning-disabled students.

The amendment allows individuals to deduct from their tax bills up to $10,000 in donations to private school scholarships for special-needs students. Private school teachers may deduct from their taxes up to $275 for school supplies they purchase for their classrooms. The credit total is capped at $8 million, and because it passed as an amendment to the 2013–14 budget, the credit is valid only for one year.

Bill sponsor state Sen. Kevin Bryant (R-Columbia) called it “a very small step.” But “it is a positive step to assist families with exceptional-needs children in that it gives them a choice,” he said.

School choice proposals have failed to pass in South Carolina although introduced every year for more than a decade. This year was the first time one reached the Senate floor for debate.

The Republican-dominated Senate voted 23–18 to table a proposal allowing deductions for parents and those who donate to private K-12 scholarships.

Alicia Constant (alicia.constant289@gmail.com) is a freelance journalist.
Oklahoma Governor Signs ‘Novel’ Student Data Bill

By Joy Pullmann

Oklahoma Gov. Mary Fallin signed a student privacy bill Oklahoma lawmakers passed by large margins in July.

The measure’s state-level protections are the first of their kind in the nation, said John Kraman, executive director of student information at the Oklahoma Department of Education, and may provide a model for other states as privacy concerns rise.

House Bill 1989 passed the House 88–2 on May 16 and the Senate 41–0 on May 22.

“There are a lot of states that have [data] governance and transparency, but we’re creating a novel way we think is stronger than any state has to make sure there is no chance for someone to be in the dark about what we’re doing,” Kraman said. “And if the public disagrees with what we’re doing, they have a chance to say no. This really pushes the boundaries of data privacy.”

HB 1989 requires the state Board of Education to inventory and publicly post student information at the Oklahoma Department of Education, and may offer parent consent at any time.

HB 1989 also automatically opts all students into data collecting, instead of requiring parent consent beforehand.

“The Quiz has gained respect as a valid measure of a person’s political beliefs,” says: “The Quiz has gained respect as a valid measure of a person’s political leanings.”

Your students will love taking a Quiz – it helps make your Social Studies, Political Science, or Government Class More Dynamic and Fun! Get your Quizzes for FREE!
Education Pensions Drain Tax Coffers, Redistribute Wealth to Administrators

By Ashley Bateman

Today’s taxpayers are heavily indebted for yesterday’s education through outsized pension promises to teachers and administrators, and a new study finds retired school administrators are hauling home the biggest piles of cash.

The national total of unfunded pension liabilities for state and local government retirees is roughly $2 trillion, half of which are K-12 liabilities.

“There is a growing divergence between the private and public sectors, with a number of implications,” said report author Cory Koedel, an economics professor at the University of Missouri-Columbia. “The pension system is sucking money out of education.”

Because administrators earn higher salaries than teachers, and pensions typically depend on salaries, administrator pensions are significantly higher than teacher pensions, found Koedel and coauthors Michael Podgursky and Shawn Ni, also economics professors at UM-Columbia.

“The School Administrator Payoff from Teacher Pensions” report shows, for example, that Missouri superintendents contribute 53 percent more to their pensions but receive 89 percent more in benefits than career teachers, and 171 percent more than novice teachers.

“By design, [typical education pensions] redistribute wealth from young, mobile teachers to career teachers and senior administrators,” the study says.

Public pension structures also push bright young people away from teaching and induce most educators to retire in their mid-50s, it notes.

While educator pensions have increased in recent years, those of private-sector professionals have flatlined.

Disadvantaging Teachers

Many younger teachers want portable retirement benefits, but because this doesn’t benefit the school administrators who make such policies, the latter generally oppose reform, Koedel said.

Currently, most education pensions are defined-benefit, meaning employees are guaranteed a certain amount and taxpayers cover any stock market dips on their behalf.

“We have some really perverse incentives built into the system,” said Sandi Jacobs, state policy director for the National Council on Teacher Quality. “Because of the defined-benefit system, there’s a sweet spot where if you don’t retire you start costing yourself money, whether you’re a superstar teacher or just so-so. We want to figure out how we can get our superstars to stay as long as possible.”

“In the other direction,” she continued, “someone who’s not as effective and knows the classroom is not the right place for them anymore, they’re going to hang on to get to that sweet spot.”

Instead of providing equal benefits, the education pension system is heavily backloaded, meaning teachers who move around or are younger get few or no benefits, whereas people who stick in the same system for a long time, as is common among administrators, receive huge financial rewards, Podgursky said.

Recent structural changes to state pensions assume teachers will exit the profession and lose their benefits because of this delayed kick-in, Jacobs said.

In the past year, the number of states requiring educators to work within one school system for ten years before receiving retirement benefits has doubled, which probably keeps people from entering the profession, Jacobs said.

Smart Teachers at Disadvantage

Pension-related financial difficulties for schools still paying retired teachers also means new teachers get smaller salaries, Jacobs said.

Barring teachers from taking their retirement benefits with them to new jobs is yet another barrier to recruiting bright teachers. “Smart, young people move around,” Podgursky said. “Every employer aside from the public education system recognizes this.”

U.S. worker mobility has increased dramatically in the past century and most private retirement benefits have adjusted to fit this reality, but state pensions are still stuck in the industrial model, Koedel said.

Podgursky recommended allowing high-quality teachers who have accrued large pension benefits to keep them so they don’t retire early.

Accounting Mess

Teacher salaries roughly equal comparable private-sector salaries, but their pension packages are worth typically one-and-a-half times private-sector benefits, according to a recent American Enterprise Institute study.

Public pensions have suffered from poor stock market returns and decades of legislatures and districts not paying into them the required amounts because their actuaries promised far higher investment gains than any private pension system, which never materialized.

“Legislators and the policy community almost never get a second opinion,” Podgursky said. “The actuaries are hired by the pension fund and produce the fiscal note and information that the legislators get. … It’s really surprising in public policy.”

No Taxpayer Representation

Taxpayers hire administrators to run schools, Podgursky noted, but “labor and management are on the same side of the bargaining table here. In a private firm, typically managers are not in the same pension plan as private employees. The executives are not part of any defined plan, ... so they can represent the stockholders.”

With education pensions, by contrast, the people making financial decisions directly benefit by increasing their spending. This removes any incentive for school leaders to promote the changes necessary to avoid huge tax liabilities for expensive pension systems, Koedel and Podgursky agreed.

“It does not seem reasonable for us to expect reform to come from inside,” Koedel said. “In a private firm where [supervisors] are disconnected, they ensure that the company moves forward and is efficient later. In this case, the incentives are aligned for that not to happen.”

Some state lawmakers have begun to recognize the pension crisis and its impacts, Podgursky said, but many are still avoiding it.

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

LEARN MORE

“The School Administrator Payoff from Teacher Pensions,” Cory Koedel, Shawn Ni, and Michael Podgursky, EducationNext, Fall 2013: http://educationnext.org/the-school-administrator-payoff-from-teacher-pensions/
**Schools Ditch Federal Lunch Subsidies Due to Costs**

By Mary C. Tillotson

Approximately 200 school districts across the country have opted out of the federal lunch program, leaving them free from regulations First Lady Michelle Obama pushed in 2010 but without federal subsidies for school lunches.

“It was basically about watching the amount of food get thrown away last year. The kids just didn’t like what we had to offer them,” said Gary Lewis, superintendent of Catlin Public Schools in Illinois. “The new guidelines from the federal level for us were too restrictive.”

Through the lunch program, the federal government dictates the type, amount, and even color of food in public schools.

Federal lunch programs began because students were coming to school malnourished, said Kay Brown, a director at the Government Accountability Office (GAO).

“We still have hunger, and we have problems with obesity and all the challenges that presents,” she said. “The solution to that is the right amount of nutritious food.”

Brown presented a GAO report to Congress in June on the effects of 2010’s Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. The report recommended changes to the law because GAO’s investigation found it increased useless calories in the law because GAO’s investigation found it increased useless calories in meals and food waste in cafeterias. About 200 schools have dropped the federal program because of its regulations and costs, according to the School Nutrition Association.

**Higher Costs for Schools**

The 2010 law will cost taxpayers another $3.2 billion over its first five years, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates. Districts are reporting fewer students purchasing lunch, and they say the new menu requires costly equipment upgrades.

Catlin lost somewhere between $5,000 and $7,000 last year because of the regulations, Lewis said. Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake district in New York served 22 percent fewer lunches and lost about $100,000.

“That was upsetting to everybody—the board of education, the school lunch manager,” said Christy Multer, a district spokesman. “She’s expected to operate her program in the black, to cover the cost of offering the lunches to students from the sales. ... If you offer food that students don’t like, they won’t buy it.”

**What Kids Won’t Eat**

The HHFKA requires schools to serve a fruit or vegetable to students, even if those students will not eat it. GAO inspectors visited an elementary school that served children oranges, which many threw in the trash, Brown said.

“In that particular case, the effect is more on the nutrition the kids are not getting,” Brown said.

She said she saw similar waste in seven of the 17 schools she visited, but she noted most of the waste occurred in the youngest grades and lunch period length may have been a factor.

The act mandates which kinds of vegetables students should be served—one from each of five categories per week. Many students readily eat beans in soup or chili, Multer said, but won’t eat them measured out in little cups the way the regulations direct.

The lunch manager was further challenged by requirements that food vendors hadn’t caught up with, Multer said. Three-ounce chicken patties, a popular meal at the district, didn’t fit the 10-ounce-per-week cap for a protein-based entrée, which averages two ounces per day. Many students were disgruntled at seeing part of the patty cut off.

“We wanted to give it a full year’s try, and we did,” Multer said. “We were hoping that maybe it would bounce back, the kids would get used to it, but it didn’t.”

Multer and Lewis said their districts will still offer free and reduced-price lunches, but local and not nationwide taxpayers will foot the bill.

“Some school districts have figured out a little better than others how to change their menus, or how to change the nutritional contents of the lunch program and make it appealing to kids.”

**Balancing Authority, Responsibility**

Multer said her district provided healthy lunches before HHFKA, and so do many districts. Each district’s challenges are different, Brown said.

“There’s such huge variety from one [school district] to another,” she said. “Some have really diverse populations, and they have to decide what kinds of ethnic foods students will accept, and some have fewer students eligible for free and reduced-price meals, and who can go off campus to buy their own food.”

Parents are an important part of keeping kids healthy, Multer said.

“The question becomes, what’s the role of the parent to ensure that each child is exposed to a wide variety of vegetables for their health versus the role of the school district?” she said. “Schools also have an obligation to work with parents to ensure that. We need to involve parents in that.”

“I think the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act has called attention to this, and maybe this is something that will promote more parents to take a more active role in their children’s eating,” she said.

Taking responsibility for school lunches means upset parents are now the district’s fault, Lewis noted, which makes them more responsive to parent concerns.

“How do you ensure healthy children and healthy adults?” Multer asked. “Some things you can legislate, and some things maybe you can’t legislate. You can’t legislate kids to like sweet potatoes.”

Mary Petrides Tillotson (maryc.tillotson@gmail.com) is an education reporter for Watchdog.org.
Some States Reaffirm Cursive Instruction

By Ashley Bateman

Several states have passed legislation requiring public schools to teach cursive handwriting, to fill in after adopting Common Core national standards, which do not require cursive.

North Carolina’s House passed its Back to Basics bill March 4. Companion Senate Bill 243 unanimously passed the Senate Education Committee. The bills require public schools to teach cursive and multiplication tables, against a decades-long trend in the opposite direction.

“Common Core does not require cursive, which is probably why our state made [cursive] optional in 2011,” said Indiana state Sen. Jean Leising (R-Oldenburg), who sponsored a similar bill. “In regard to teachers and parents, I’ve heard a similar quantity from each about the importance of cursive. Teachers feel if it’s not mandated, they won’t be allowed to teach it because of other mandates and requirements.”

California, Georgia, Idaho, and Massachusetts recently have passed laws requiring cursive instruction. South Carolina and Indiana lawmakers considered similar bills. Because Common Core drops cursive, most schools are unlikely to teach it if states do not individually require it.

As typing has become predominant, many schools have dropped cursive, prompting researchers, legislators, and parents to discuss whether the skill is necessary for today’s kids.

Mandates vs. Desire

Indiana House Education Chairman Bob Behning (R-Indianapolis) denied Leising’s bill a House hearing for the second year in a row, although it passed the Senate.

Fourteen of Indiana’s 50 senators “supported the bill strongly enough to put their name on it,” Leising said. “Clearly, the bill would have passed the House if it had been given the opportunity for a hearing. I think people are very dissatisfied with educational outcomes right now.”

Rather than wait for a state law, New Jersey grandmother Sylvia Hughes formed a cursive writing club at Nellie K. Parker Elementary in Hackensack when she realized her third- and fourth-grade grandsons were not learning it in class.

“Students have pride in advancing in an area which was a tradition in our society for many years,” Hughes said. “Note-taking in class, as well as tests, can be completed quicker in cursive.”

The club quickly grew and now has 60 third- and fourth-grade members. Club members learn to hold a pencil properly when writing, view the movement and shape of cursive letters on a whiteboard, and practice writing letters that are consistent in shape and flow.

Parents were surprised to learn a club was necessary to get students cursive instruction, but they largely support the club, Hughes said.

“I was quite surprised by the response and by the enthusiasm of the students,” Hughes said. “It has been a very rewarding experience for me. [Cursive] is just as important today as it was back in the 1940s when I attended grade school.”

College Prep

Although laptops, tablets, and other electronic writing tools dominate college classrooms, cursive still has an important place in higher education, said Robert Weir, a lecturer at Smith College. Many professors and high school teachers assign in-class essays, for which cursive is useful, he noted.

“Cursive and multiplication tables have a similar value in that they simply give one another tool for when preferred tools don’t work,” Weir said. “Those forced to write produce less qualitative arguments if they simply can’t produce enough to make their points. I’ve seen students who couldn’t even finish an exam, let alone write anything of value. I can only applaud what North Carolina is doing.”

Author of four books on the American labor movement, Weir maintains cursive is still an important skill for graphic designers, architects, and journalists. Historians also rely heavily on knowledge of cursive in transcribing and analyzing older texts, Leising said.

Science Says

Research on how children’s brains develop indicates cursive is a crucial skill. In a mid-sized suburban Michigan school district, last year Hanover Research studied the effects of handwriting instruction on students to help the district decide whether to toss cursive because Common Core does not require it. They concluded elementary students need “at least 15 minutes of handwriting daily for cognitive, writing skills, and reading comprehension improvement,” said Sidney Phillips, Hanover’s senior vice president of development.

“I think there’s an overemphasis on technical integration in the classroom with minimal research done,” he said. “Many districts that have a technological component are a little behind [in related research].”

Opponents of teaching cursive in schools argue a student can easily learn to read it without hours of writing practice.

However, “there is a vast gap between understanding how to do something and having facility with a skill,” Weir said. “The generally accepted standard is that it takes 100 days of steady practice to move to proficiency in most things involving body memory. Master level is even longer.”

Leising points to research by Karin James, a neuroscientist and assistant professor at Indiana University, that further supports teaching cursive.

Using brain imaging technology, James has confirmed printed writing is far better than typing at stimulating the cognitive growth and development of small children in areas such as connecting letters, learning to read from left to right, and reading more effectively.

“There are many things for which cursive is no longer needed and, as an educator, I’d far rather read a printed paper than a handwritten one,” Weir said. “That said, I still see cursive as a skill we need to have, much like most other practical skills.”

“As a Grandmother, I was quite surprised by the response and by the enthusiasm of the students. I think people are very dissatisfied with educational outcomes right now.”

Jean Leising, State Senator Oldenburg, Indiana
New York Legislature to Reconsider Testing, Common Core Standards

By Bailey Pritchett

Legislators will review New York’s recent education reform agenda, including Common Core national education standards, in public hearings this fall.

The quality of Common Core, state assessments, and student privacy are the main issues the hearings will address after widespread public outcry largely centered on testing.

“We are holding the hearings to see if we’re getting a good bang for our buck,” said state Sen. John Flanagan (R-Smithtown), chairman of the Senate’s education committee.

In New York, education policy and administration is monitored by a Board of Regents consisting of 16 members the administration is monitored by a Board of Regents consisting of 16 members the legislature elects. In 2010 it adopted a new reform agenda in line with President Barack Obama’s education policy priorities, centered on Common Core, implement the upcoming national Common Core tests, Burris argued tying myriad policies to student test results harms education.

Although assessments are important tools that help educators measure what students know and what they do with information, it is unwise to use them for other things, she said.

“Test scores are used to close schools, evaluate teachers, and to retain students,” Burris said. “When that happens, you have to be careful. They can cause teacher behavioral changes [in the classroom] which [are] not in the interest of the child.”

‘Climate of Fear’

This can mean a teacher tends to focus on students whose scores will improve and boost his or her evaluation, she said. Burris says Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) testing incorporates the dangers of high-stakes testing.

Mother and special-education teacher Jia Lee, who teaches in New York City, said she became an activist because of testing research federal and local lawmakers have ignored.

“High-stakes testing has made a climate of fear in schools,” she said. “It’s all about surviving.”

Other parents joined Lee to start Change the Stakes, an organization campaigning against high-stakes testing in New York.

‘Privacy Concerns’

Parents all over New York have flocked to public meetings to complain about the state’s partnership with inBloom, a data-mining company partly funded by Bill Gates.

The nonprofit initially partnered with eight states to use student information gained through academic tests. To date, five of the eight states have withdrawn from the partnership after public outcry over inBloom’s plans to amass data-points about millions of children, including Social Security numbers, hobbies, attitudes about school, learning disabilities, test scores, home addresses, and more.

“New York City has transferred the city’s information onto the data cloud without parents even knowing about it,” Lee said. “There is no transparency or accountability at the top.”

Mother Yvonne Gasperino, who initiated Stop Common Core in New York State, has partnered with parents in 36 of the state’s 62 counties to fight Common Core standards.

“Sen. Flanagan holding these hearings is a positive” Gasperino said. “My fear is that he will not give the opportunity to testify to both sides.”

Flanagan announced the hearings will start in the third week of September. He plans to hold four all over the state. To save time, only invited testimony will be allowed, but he says there will be opportunities for public comment as well.

“We plan to have a very solid cross-section of opinion,” Flanagan said.

By Ashley Bateman

Two years ago Romain Bertrand was a middle-school math teacher, finishing his fifth year teaching in North Carolina’s Charlotte-Mecklenberg district and thinking he needed a way to reach more teachers and students.

He moved to a new position mentoring and coaching teachers, but professionally, he felt stuck.

“This wasn’t going to give my career the next steps I was looking for in terms of advancement and salary,” Bertrand said. “I felt the only possibility for me was leadership roles, like principals, but I didn’t have as much passion [for that].”

This fall Bertrand is one of 26 teachers in the district to manage several classrooms at once in a program piloting one of several models from consulting firm Public Impact to expand excellent teachers’ reach.

Paying Great Teachers More

“We were trying to achieve two goals,” said Bryan Hassel, Public Impact’s codirector. “How could you reach every child with an excellent teacher instead of just a fraction? And how could you pay teachers more, ideally a lot more, within existing budgets?”

Teachers in the Opportunity Culture pilot receive a $4,500 to $23,000 salary increase. Less active or far-reaching teachers receive less pay.

All pilot sites combine several options, which include bigger classes for excellent teachers, remote or online learning under top teachers’ instruction, subject specialization, and multi-classroom leaders who coach and support teachers.

Remote learning options include parent- and community-supervised classes.

Pilot Sites

Four low-performing Charlotte-Mecklenberg schools will pilot the program this year. Charlotte-Mecklenberg has a strong evaluation system to discover leadership capability, Hassel said, which is especially important for teachers who will lead several classrooms.

“What drew me to actual Public Impact’s work around Opportunity Culture was the question that they posed: Will we ever in our nation be able to hire, fire, and develop teachers at a fast enough rate to ensure that every student has a quality teacher?” said Denise Watts, a superintendent overseeing those schools.

Three Nashville, Tennessee schools are also piloting Opportunity Culture models this fall.

“MNPS [Metro Nashville Public Schools] embraced the Opportunity Culture framework as a reform strategy to sustainably address the persistent underperformance of participating schools,” said Derek Richey, MNPS’s director of Operational Innovation. “The three participating schools all have new leaders, so the Public Impact partnership creates a method for them to capture and implement their instructional vision.”

Other Districts Signing On

Each of the schools has created positions for multi-classroom leaders (MCLs).

“In some cases, the MCL will be responsible for one or more grade levels and, in other cases, they will be responsible for a subject area,” Richey said. “In year one, there will be 11 MCLs across the three schools.”

The schools also have designed a position for 30 “aspiring teachers” from local teacher preparation programs, who tutor students and work with small groups, like teacher’s aides.

In early May, Clark County, Nevada also signed on to pilot Opportunity Culture. It’s the fifth-largest school district in the country. Charter schools in Chicago, Washington, DC, Newark, and Minneapolis have put the models into place, too.

Teachers on Board

The declining academic achievement of those who become teachers and their declining relative wages lend urgency to efforts such as Public Impact’s to improve the teaching workforce, said John Chubb, a fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution.

“So we’re not attracting [top talent] and we’re not doing a very good job of retaining—half of teachers wash out in the first five years,” Chubb said. “Wages are one issue, and the other is working conditions: A seniority system that doesn’t allow schools to reward teachers for service beyond time served, … Training and professional development systems are very weak.”

This is a huge problem, he said, because studies show teachers are the most important in-school influence on academic achievement.

The four Charlotte-Mecklenberg schools received more than 700 applications for 26 positions.

“It wasn’t expected because the only people who knew about it were the nine schools and only four were deeply immersed. We hadn’t done broad-range communication,” Watts said. “To me, it speaks to the interest. It gives people the opportunity to do something different.”

Teachers also wanted to have a say in school policies, she said.

“For the first time I have seen teachers having a voice in what reform and innovation looks like,” Watts said. “A lot of times that conversation happens at the central office, state level, federal level.”

Because many teachers love teaching, removing the less-attractive elements of the job and offering them career advancement prospects and higher salaries would keep many more of the best in the profession, Bertrand said.

Measuring Success

The Public Impact team will judge how well the program has worked by measuring how much students learn academically, whether parents are satisfied, and how well schools implement the new ideas, Hassel said.

Key indicators of first-year success would include higher student achievement, better teacher retention, and spreading the models to other schools, Watts said.

“We won’t see the fruits of our labor until May 2014, but we’ve already hit on some of the things I would have hoped to be able to do,” Watts said. “[We’ve] created a zone that people are eager and excited to go to.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.aa@goolemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
Why the Grand Compromise on Common Core Is Dangerous

By Larry Kaufmann

ot everything worth doing should be done by the federal government. That may be the understatement of the millennium, but it’s the key to understanding why the current push for Common Core standards in education is a bad idea.

Common Core is the latest wrinkle in a 20-year trend to raise standards and increase accountability in education policy. Perhaps inevitably, this trend has coincided with a growing federal role in setting educational standards and mandated testing.

This movement has been bipartisan, with one of the largest expansions of federal authority occurring under President George W. Bush’s 2001 No Child Left Behind Act. This law requires standardized testing of students attending schools that receive federal funds, with the tests designed and administered at the state level.

Common Core actually began as a voluntary effort among states to provide guidance to educators on what students should know in each grade to be ready for college and compete in a globalized economy. However, the Obama administration interjected itself into the initiative when its 2009 stimulus package made $4.35 billion in Race to the Top funds available to school districts. For a state to compete for these “bonus” funds, it essentially had to adopt Common Core national standards. The administration also has provided Race to the Top funds to two consortia that will test and evaluate student performance relative to the Common Core.

Opposition from Left, Right

These developments have sparked opposition from left and right alike. Parents worry the move toward de facto national standards and testing will undermine local control of content and curriculum.

The testing protocol also raises alarms. To make “apples to apples” educational assessments among diverse student populations throughout the country, the testing consortia are developing extraordinarily detailed databases on students’ income, demographic, and personal characteristics. These data will reportedly be compiled, and accessible to the public, at the classroom level.

These features of Common Core are troubling. Although the federal government cannot legally prescribe educational content, the link between federal standards, federal testing, and monetary bonuses naturally creates incentives for local districts to align their curriculum toward what the Common Core advocates and tests. The nationwide database also raises obvious privacy concerns. Even though student identities will be hidden, it’s difficult to see why the future of American education requires the test scores and family incomes of, say, the fourth grade class at Crestwood Elementary to be revealed to everyone from Modesto to Maine.

Nevertheless, Common Core is defended vigorously by high-profile supporters on both the left (Michelle Rhee, ex-chancellor of the Washington, DC public schools) and the right (Louisiana’s Republican Gov. Bobby Jindal).

One prominent defender is conservative education analyst Chester Finn, who believes Common Core can be the key to a kind of grand bargain between federal, state, and local governments on education policy. In Finn’s words, “if everybody’s schools use the same academic targets and metrics to track their academic performance—duly reported by demographic subgroup, perhaps by individual classrooms too—and if everybody has access to this information via a transparent reporting system, a powerful case can be made for getting ‘big government’ back away from managing schools.”

What Appeasers Do

This brings to mind Winston Churchill’s definition of an appeaser as someone who feeds a crocodile, hoping it will eat him last. It takes an enormous leap of faith to believe the best way to keep the federal government out of managing schools is to give it more power to set standards and measure outcomes at schools. It’s easier to see Finn’s grand compromise collapsing in the opposite direction: Federal authorities will increase their meddling if federal standards and measurement efforts stubbornly refuse to yield much educational improvement.

Unfortunately, this will almost certainly be the case. Primary and secondary education are inherently local matters. America’s public education system was the envy of the world when it was managed and financed exclusively with local resources. In the past 50 years, as education has shifted toward sclerotic, unionized administration and greater federal financing, our K-12 schools have declined from the best to essentially the worst in the developed world. The last thing American education needs right now is another top-down, bureaucratized and technocratic solution to what are fundamentally local challenges and issues.

A Better Idea

If Common Core is the wrong approach for Wisconsin, what is the right one? Exactly the one that inspired such angst in last week’s opinion piece in Isthmus: school choice. Nothing promotes accountability like parents’ ability to take their children—and the funding that follows them—out of a school that is not getting the job done. Education policy that empowers parents rather than bureaucrats is the best way to improve educational standards and outcomes in the medium to long run.

In the interim, if Wisconsin believes its education standards need to be improved, it’s easier and more straightforward to learn from the best and most innovative public school systems in the nation (such as Massachusetts and Florida) rather than hitching our wagon to Common Core.

Larry Kaufmann (lkaufmann@earthlink.net) is an economic consultant based in Madison, Wisconsin. This article originally appeared in Isthmus and is reprinted with permission.
With 18 titles so far, The Heartland Institute’s ebook offerings range from *The Obamacare Disaster* and *The Patriot’s Toolbox* to *Booker T. Washington: A Re-Examination*. In the convenient, easily downloaded Kindle format, you can read these and other Heartland books on one handy device.

Visit Amazon’s Kindle store, search for The Heartland Institute, and discover our offerings for yourself.

We’re just a click away!

The Heartland Institute is a 29-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.
You Can Take Our Experts Anywhere

Whatever your policy interests, Heartland’s daily podcasts connect you with key players

**BUDGET AND TAX**
Steve Stanek and other budget and tax policy experts relate news and views from the local, state, and federal arenas.
heartland.org/issues/budgets-and-taxes

**ENVIRONMENT**
James M. Taylor conducts interviews and breaks news on climate change and other environment issues.
heartland.org/issues/environment

**FINANCE, INSURANCE, AND REAL ESTATE**
Stanek also interviews some of the nation’s leading experts on FIRE policy issues.
heartland.org/issues/finance-insurance-and-real-estate

**HEALTH CARE**
Benjamin Domenech interviews leading health care policy analysts and relates news and views from the health policy arena.
heartland.org/issues/health-care

**INFOTECH & TELECOM**
Jim Lakely brings news and views on information technology and telecom issues.
heartland.org/issues/telecom

**EDUCATION**
Joy Pullmann and the staff of the Center for Transforming Education share news and views on topics from distance learning to vouchers.
heartland.org/issues/education

Subscribe to Heartland’s daily podcasts on iTunes or listen from the audio pages at heartland.org

The Heartland Institute is a 29-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 312/372-4000.