Judge Backs Parents in Calif. Trigger Case

By Mary Petrides Tillotson

A judge has ruled in favor of parents hoping to take over low-performing Desert Trails Elementary in Adelanto, California under the state’s Parent Trigger law.

“Overall, it’s a landmark ruling,” said Gloria Romero, head of California’s Democrats for Education Reform and the law’s author. “It’s a new day in California, and it’s one that upholds the rights of parents to truly become the architects of their children’s educational futures.”

The law lets parents take over an underperforming school if at least 51 percent sign a petition and bring it to their school board. Though enough

Ten Thousand Students Apply for Vouchers in Louisiana

By Vicki Alger

More than 10,000 students applied to attend private schools this fall under Louisiana’s statewide voucher program, five times more than State Superintendent John White anticipated.

Other observers weren’t caught off guard. “It comes as no surprise so many families are seeking out better alternatives for their children,” said Kevin Kane, president of the Pelican Institute for Public Policy. “If anything, I would expect this number to grow as more people hear about the program and its benefits.”

In April, Gov. Bobby Jindal (R) signed into law Act 2, extending the New Orleans

NCLB Waivers
Thirty-two states find their education policies subject to Obama administration review after receiving waivers of No Child Left Behind.

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New Hampshire Tax Credits
New Hampshire’s legislature overwhelmingly overrides the governor’s veto, thus establishing the state’s first tax credit scholarships.

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Latinos Approve Choice
A new poll finds Latino voters more concerned about education than immigration policy.

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Hoosier Choice
Indiana’s year-old voucher program is wildly popular.

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Wrong Answer
Increasing education spending bears no statistical relationship to academic improvement, writes Victor Joecks.

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Freely Cultivating Citizens
With the freedom of charter schooling, education entrepreneurs are bringing rich literacy to poor families.

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The Worlds of School Choice:
Many Countries, Many Models

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Parents in Texas Sue the State, Seek More Efficient, Less Bureaucratic System

By Connie Sadowski

Families and businesses looking to make Texas schools more efficient have plugged into an ongoing lawsuit by more than 500 school districts suing the state for a more adequate and equitable distribution of education dollars.

Texas’s constitution requires the legislature to provide an “efficient system of public free schools,” but public schools are not efficient, said the lead attorney for the coalition, Chris Diamond. His team plans to argue that fewer state and federal mandates on public schools, akin to the environment for charter schools, will create more bang for Texas’s educational buck. Diamond will request the court require the state to lift its charter school cap and create a more competitive education environment.

“Some parents and business persons not well served by public schools have intervened to ask for efficiency productive of results,” said Kent Grusendorf, director of Texans for Efficiency and Equity in Education (TREE), a nonprofit organization.

TREE seeks a permanent injunction prohibiting the state from financing public schools until legislators remedy the lack of efficiency. The proposed injunction would give the legislature a reasonable opportunity to fix the deficiencies before prohibitions take effect.

Spending Rises Five Times Enrollment

While student enrollment in Texas has risen by about 19.7 percent in the past decade, total education spending has risen nearly five times as fast, by 95.3 percent, according to the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts.

Texas schools received $42.8 million, or 44 percent of Texas’s general revenue, and enrolled 4.9 million students in the 2010–11 school year. Education is funded 36.7 percent by local property taxes, 18.2 percent by local bonds, 37.3 percent by state funds, and 7.8 percent from federal funds.

“We joined this lawsuit because while there are school districts that are efficient, fiscally prudent, and doing well educating our children, no district has ever done results with little waste,” Grusendorf said. “The court obviously finds efficiency important, as it repeats that language in almost every one of four school finance opinions.”

In the most recent school finance case, from 2006, the justices “could not rule on public school inefficiencies,” he said. The court wrote, “We are constrained by the arguments raised by the parties to address only issues of school finance. We have not been called upon to consider, for example, the improvements in education which could be realized by eliminating gross wastes in the bureaucratic administration of the system. The Legislature is not so restricted.”

Inefficiencies Ignored

Rather than provide adequate classroom support for her son with special needs, said Darlene Menn, “the board of Odem-Edroy Independent School District blames the state legislators for money shortages and chooses to use students’ money to pay lawyers to sue the State of Texas.”

Various state and federal laws mandate class size limits, teacher benefits, and testing and reporting requirements, and school districts routinely claim these unduly drive up the cost of educating a student, especially those like her son, Menn said. She is a party to the lawsuit.

“The system could save up to $2 billion by allowing all schools to operate under more reasonable rules and regulations much like the more efficient regulations under which public charter schools operate,” Grusendorf said.

Connie Sadowski (connie@ceoaustin.org) is an education consultant who coordinates the Red Apple Project and directs the Education Options Resource Center at the Austin CEO Foundation. She and her husband have four kids in middle school, high school, and college.
Romney Backs Parent Trigger, Obama Says No Comment

By Casey Cheney

Recent reports claiming the Obama administration supports Parent Trigger or parent empowerment legislation are untrue.

The administration has not yet taken a public stance on the issue, U.S. Department of Education spokesman Justin Hamilton told School Reform News.

Parent Trigger laws have passed in four states after first becoming California law in 2010. They allow parents whose children attend a failing school to require various reforms—such as closing the school, converting it to a charter school, or allowing students to take state dollars to any school they wish—if a majority agrees.

Reuters reported in May that the Obama administration supports Parent Trigger laws. Ben Austin, executive director of advocacy group Parent Revolution, told the Arizona Capitol Times the same thing in February. Parent Revolution Deputy Director Gabe Rose told School Reform News the source of Austin’s claim: a 2010 New York Times article.

Democratic Roots

That article said U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan supported Parent Trigger efforts at McKinley Elementary in Compton, California. Because of lawsuits, parents who pulled the trigger there still have not seen the law’s promised effects.

Hamilton said while Duncan has a record of supporting parent empowerment within schools, that does not signify an endorsement of such legislation on behalf of the Obama administration.

A Democrat was first to propose Parent Trigger legislation. Parent Revolution has progressive, community organizing roots and leaders who publicly declare themselves Democrats. Teachers unions, which overwhelmingly support Democratic candidates, have fought vociferously against Parent Trigger legislation and other parental empowerment measures such as vouchers.

Romney States Support

By contrast, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney has expressed support for parent empowerment on several occasions.

Andrea Saul, Romney’s press secretary, said in an e-mail that Romney believes Parent Trigger legislation is “a good example of parental empowerment/involvement that he supports at the state level.

“This is a state-specific law and should remain that way,” she added.

Romney publicly expressed support for the law in an education platform speech and his campaign’s accompanying white paper, “A Chance for Every Child.”

“[States] sacrificed [autonomy] when they first started taking major federal education money in the 1960s. Many also gave away their right to set their own curricular standards when they scrambled for Race to the Top funds.”

—Neal McCluskey, Associate Director Center for Educational Freedom

CATO INSTITUTE

Most States’ Education Policies Now Subject to Review by Administration

By Lindsey Burke

The U.S. Department of Education has now waived No Child Left Behind for 34 states that agreed to reconfigure their education systems according to the executive branch’s preferences, with three more waiver applications under review. Washington, DC also received a waiver.

NCLB governs most federal K-12 spending and mandates. The 34 waiver states are now free from, among other regulations, Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) mandates, which required states to make every student proficient in reading and math by 2014. The increasing targets on this requirement would have labeled most schools “failing” by 2012.

“We’re in a horrible state of limbo—a very frightening and unclear state of limbo,” said Sandy Kress, a lawyer who helped craft NCLB. “You now have some distorted version of the law in place, which varies from state to state.”

New Federal Mandates

The latest states to receive waivers include Alaska and Virginia, even though they have not adopted nationwide Common Core education standards the administration had suggested were necessary for a waiver. Virginia’s waiver says the state will “fully align” its standards with the Common Core, a grade-by-grade list of what children must learn in math and English.

The Obama administration also requires waiver states to base teacher evaluations partly on their students’ standardized test scores. The law nowhere allows the DOE to require policy changes for waivers, although many states, including Washington and Wisconsin, had to revise their proposed changes before DOE granted them waivers.

“It’s a big game of the feds demanding their favorite inputs without legislative authority, and the states are agreeing in varying ways,” Kress said. “It’s posing a lot of controversy in these various states.”

State autonomy was compromised long before the waiver process, said Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom.

“[States] sacrificed [autonomy] when they first started taking major federal education money in the 1960s,” McCluskey said. “Many also gave away their right to set their own curricular standards when they scrambled for Race to the Top funds. Perhaps the biggest loss is that states’ representatives in Washington gave up their constitutionally delegated powers by letting President Obama, for all intents and purposes, unilaterally rewrite the law.”

‘Radically Repurposed’

Honest observers could have predicted from its inception that NCLB would end in confusion, said Andy Porter, dean of the University of Pennsylvania’s graduate program in education.

“Far too many schools simply can’t reach this goal [of 100 percent proficiency],” Porter said.

Though NCLB grants the U.S. secretary of education the power to waive its provisions, the waivers have no force of law, said Rick Hess, director of education policy at the American Enterprise Institute.

“[NCLB] is not dead; it’s just been radically repurposed,” Hess said. “Several of NCLB’s sillier elements may have been largely neutralized, but the law continues to be a threat that fundamentally alters the relationship between Uncle Sam and the states.”

Lindsey M. Burke (lindsey.burke@heritage.org) is an education policy analyst at The Heritage Foundation.

“Presidential candidate Mitt Romney believes Parent Trigger legislation is ‘a good example of parental empowerment/involvement that he supports at the state level. This is a state-specific law and should remain that way.’”

—Andrea Saul, Press Secretary, Romney Campaign

Podcast Info

Abysmal Civics Knowledge Prompts Fla. to Implement New Middle School Test

By Caleb Whitmer

This school year Florida’s seventh graders will have to take a new standardized civics test. In 2014–15, students must pass it to move up to high school.

After four years of tinkering with the idea in response to laughably low civics knowledge among Florida’s students and the general public, the Florida House and Senate unanimously passed a bill in 2010 requiring the test be implemented by this school year. In Florida, civics is traditionally taught in seventh grade.

“The levels of civic participation in the state are really pretty low,” said Douglass Dobson, executive director of the Lou Frey Institute. “One component of addressing that is civic education.”

Low Civic Health Ratings

The Lou Frey Institute and National Conference on Citizenship regularly compile a “Civic Health Index,” which bill sponsors presented to Florida lawmakers in 2009 and 2010.

The index found Florida 34th among the states in voter participation, 49th in volunteering, 48th in public meeting attendance, and 37th in citizens working together to solve local problems.

In addition to those four main indicators, the study also found only 46 percent of Floridians had donated $25 or more to charity in 2008, putting the state 44th in giving.

“[The index] provided evidence that something needed to be done to address civic health,” Dobson said.

The National Conference on Citizenship regularly compares all states on the same measures. Florida ranked 46th in the Civic Health Index in 2009, the latest available.

“Despite the bright spots and other evidence of personal compassion among some,” the study concluded, “it is clear that Florida’s communities face a significant challenge to not only improve the state of their civic health, but to find ways to avoid further deterioration of citizen engagement.”

A National Problem

Florida isn’t alone in its lackluster civic engagement.

The 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress found just 24 percent of high school seniors rate “proficient” in civics and only 12 percent reach that level in U.S. history.

Two things contribute to this deficit, said Cheryl Miller, program manager of the American Enterprise Institute’s American Citizenship Program: High schools emphasize other subjects, and civics teachers’ education priorities have changed.

Teachers fear social studies is being “pushed aside” in favor of math and reading, Miller said.

“There’s a real concern that social studies—this is what people are telling me—is being treated like art,” Miller said. “And art’s treated like it doesn’t matter.”

That’s why many teachers greet standardized civics tests with enthusiasm, Miller said. AEI’s program surveyed 1,000 randomly selected social studies teachers, and 90 percent said they favored standardized testing.

“Teachers seem to want to be tested,” she said. “They want to know they are accountable.”

Deemphasizing Basic Facts

There is some question, however, about whether what teachers want to teach is really civics.

An AEI study of social studies teachers in 1,111 schools and three focus groups found about 50 percent said “internalizing core values like tolerance and equality” ranked first or second of five teaching priorities. Just under 20 percent believed teaching “key facts and major events” should be their first or second priority.

“If students aren’t learning this in social studies,” Miller said, “where are they learning it?”

Before the 2010 bill passed, Florida public schools were not required to teach civics.

“Some taught it, others used to teach it,” said Randall Felton, the social studies coordinator for Florida’s Department of Education’s test development center.

This year the test will not factor into a student’s civics class grade. In 2013–14, it will account for 30 percent of the student’s in-class grade, and in 2014–15 all students must pass the test to gain high school admission.

Students can retake the test in eighth grade should they fail the first time.

Ensuring Standards Apply

Florida already requires standardized tests for several other subjects, including algebra, geometry, biology, and U.S. history.

“When you don’t have a standardized assessment, you don’t know how well the standards are being taught. … We believe so much in the standards we want to make sure they are being taught,” said Sharon Koon, assistant deputy commissioner for the Florida DOE’s Office of Assessment.

Caleb Whitmer (cwhitmer92@gmail.com) writes from Hillsdale, Michigan. He is a sophomore pursuing an English degree with a journalism focus at Hillsdale College.

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New Hampshire Overrides Veto, Passes School Choice

By Sally Nelson

New Hampshire’s legislature overwhelmingly overrode Gov. John Lynch’s veto of a tax credit scholarship measure, thus making the state the eleventh in the nation to create such a program allowing families to choose their child’s K-12 school.

The new law will let nonprofits collect from corporations donations for scholarships worth up to $2,500 each year. The scholarships will be available to students whose families earn up to 300 percent of the federal poverty level—$69,150 for a family of four—so the children can attend a public or private school of choice.

Home-schooled students are eligible for scholarships up to $625, in a first-in-the-nation provision. Companies will receive 85 percent of their donation amount as a credit against their tax bill. The program is capped at $6.8 million in its first year, which will increase by 25 percent every year the program reaches at least 80 percent of the cap.

The House voted 236–108 and the Senate 16–7 to override Lynch’s veto of SB 372. Every Democrat in the Senate and most Democrats in the House voted to uphold the veto.

Governor’s Complaints

Lynch, a Democrat, vetoed the bill on June 18, largely, he said, because he feared it would decrease public school funding. He claimed each district would lose between $3,450 and $8,381 per student who left.

Any tax credit program enacted by the legislature must not weaken our public school system in New Hampshire, downshift additional costs on local communities or taxpayers, or allow private companies to determine where public school money will be spent,” he said in a statement.

He also disagreed with the bill because it would send money previously destined for public coffers to private organizations instead, he said.

The governor voted strictly for political reasons, said Charlie Arlinghaus, president of the Josiah Bartlett Center for Public Policy.

“The governor vetoed it at the end of the day because he’s a Democrat against school choice. We’re fairly convinced he would have vetoed any school choice bill,” Arlinghaus said. “[Democrats] regard it, inexplicably, as a threat to public education.”

Funding Impact Exaggerated

The law will not hurt public school systems as a whole, Arlinghaus said, first because it will affect only one-quarter of 1 percent of total New Hampshire school funding.

“For the governor to be right, you would have to believe that [retaining] 99.75 percent of funding is the same thing as devastation,” Arlinghaus said.

“And that’s just silly.”

“No single school is good for every single student. And that’s the fundamental recognition of this bill,” he said. “A school can be a great choice for 90 percent of the students, but no school can be the right choice for every student. That’s the danger when you assign schools through ZIP code.”

Sally Nelson (sallynelson7@gmail.com) writes from Hillsdale, Michigan. She is pursuing an English degree from Hillsdale College’s honors program.

Pennsylvania Legislators Boost Choice for Students in State’s Worst Schools

By Rachel Sheffield

Most children attending Pennsylvania’s worst-performing 15 percent of public schools can now transfer to a public or private school their families choose, thanks to a new law Gov. Tom Corbett signed June 30.

The new tax credit scholarship builds on the state’s existing Educational Improvement Tax Credit program, which has been in place since 2001. Like the EITC, the new program allows businesses tax credits for donating to nonprofits that in turn offer eligible students scholarships.

“[Parents] who have the means to take away funding. The new program, dubbed EITC 2.0, is capped at $50 million in tax credits each year. The scholarships will be worth up to $8,500 for most eligible children and up to $15,000 for special-needs students. For 2012–13, eligibility is limited to students from households that make up to $60,000 plus $12,000 for each additional dependent.

In 2013 the income threshold will increase to $75,000 plus $15,000 per dependent. Students in low-income households will receive preference, as will those in low-performing school districts.

Escape from Violent Schools

In addition to helping students escape poorly performing schools, the new program will give students an escape from those schools’ high levels of violence. The lowest-performing 5 percent of Pennsylvania schools experienced one act of violent crime every 17 minutes, according to a recent report from Pennsylvania’s Commonwealth Foundation.

“When the Three R’s have turned from reading, writing, and arithmetic into robberies, rapes, and riots, children’s cries for help could not go further ignored,” said Jay Ostrich, the foundation’s public policy director.

The state budget Corbett approved established additional education reforms, including a new teacher evaluation system that breaks teacher ratings into four categories and a plan to improve financially failing school districts.

“We salute lawmakers for passing legislation that will help thousands of Pennsylvania families have a choice to escape violent and failing public schools, there is more work to be done to extend these opportunities to more families,” Ostrich said.

Rachel Sheffield (rachel.sheffield@heritage.org) is an education research assistant at The Heritage Foundation.
Schools Spy on Kids Thought to Be Out-of-District

By Joy Pullmann

A little-known but common practice among school districts has them hiring investigators to follow kids home, snap pictures and video, trace parents’ license plates, and follow their cars around in unmarked vehicles. Sometimes, these investigations land parents in jail.

Why? Residency fraud. It is illegal for many families to pick their child’s public school. Because there are great disparities between public school quality and what districts spend through local property taxes, children illegally crossing district lines can cost schools thousands of dollars per child per year.

There are no federal data on residency fraud, according to researchers at the National Center for Education Statistics, and states likewise rarely catalog such incidents. Thus it’s difficult to tell whether increased media attention to such incidents. Thus it’s difficult to tell whether increased media attention to such incidents.

Finding Frauds

New technology not available two years ago allows school districts to more quickly and cheaply identify potential fraudsters, said James Mesis, owner of VerifyResidence.com. Mesis developed patented software that compares fraud databases with school rosters to identify potential fraudsters for district residency officers.

On average, Mesis says, 0.5 to 1 percent of a school’s enrollment surfaces as potential fraud.

“It’s a big deal to people who are paying very high taxes and can’t afford it and those taxes are the result of the number of kids in the school system,” he said. “For every person that objects to verifying the residence, there are just as many who say, ‘This is fantastic. How much of my tax dollars are paying for kids that didn’t live in the district?’”

Recent High-Profile Incidents

Most states require school districts to verify students are district residents, which ended up frightening one Oklahoma mom. A residency investigator without an ID visited Kendall Bible’s home in June and asked to see her 12-year-old daughter’s bedroom and belongings.

Last year, Ohio Gov. John Kasich pardoned single mom Kelley Williams-Bolar for committing residency fraud felonies to get her two daughters into a better suburban public school. The incident received national attention.

Stealing Property Taxes?

Districts prosecuting illegal students’ families are simply guarding their income, which most families paying local property taxes appreciate, says Randall Reback, an assistant economics professor at Columbia University.

“Communities want to protect their local resources by keeping [schools] an exclusive club where you have to live in the right district to go to our schools,” he said.

Reback and two other researchers recently studied the effect of school choice on property values. They found school choice, in the form of open enrollment and to a much larger extent vouchers, boosts property values in poor neighborhoods because people can choose to live in the cheaper area yet still send their children to good schools. School choice reduces property values in nearby rich areas, because people no longer have to live there to get better schools.

When moving to nicer areas, middle-income and wealthier families essentially choose to tax themselves more in exchange for access to better public schools, thus paying a tuition poor people cannot, Reback said.

Illegal attendees devalue nearby homes and dilute local property tax revenue, he said—prime reasons for districts to crack down.

Impact on Kids

Parents desperate enough to lie and pretend they live elsewhere to enroll their child in a particular school often have reasons beyond academics, Mesis said. In his 20 years of investigative work, he’s met hundreds of such families.

Some parents ditch their assigned school because another is closer to work or has a baseball team where their child will stand out, he said. Or the parents recently have divorced and don’t want to further disrupt their child’s life by switching his or her school. Districts often check on parents of extremely expensive special-needs children, he said.

Mesis says “over 90 percent” of such cases end with the children leaving the schools when caught, not in sensational arrests or lawsuits for the money lost.

“You’re teaching the kid to lie, and it’s ok to lie if your daddy says it’s ok,” he said. “Half the time the kids are the first ones who blunt out where they live.”

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

“Communities want to protect their local resources by keeping [schools] an exclusive club where you have to live in the right district to go to their schools.”

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Illinois Teacher Pensions Broke

By Vicki Alger

Illinois school districts and teachers paid a share of their own pension contributions, scarce taxpayer dollars could go to the schools that need them most, according to a new report from the Illinois Policy Institute.

The state currently pays the “employer share” of a teacher’s pension contribution, which school districts pay in many other states. Many Illinois districts, in turn, pick up the “employee share” of a teacher’s pension contribution, meaning teachers contribute little or nothing.

In 2011, pension benefits for teachers cost the state approximately $800 million, yet school districts contributed only $50 million, according to the report, “Playing Favorites: Education Spending Favors Wealthy, Suburban Schools.” The wealthiest districts received the biggest payouts.

There is growing consensus Illinois’ teacher pension system must be fixed, a reversal in state culture, says Collin Hitt, the institute’s senior director of government affairs.

An Illinois teacher who retired in 2010 after 30 years of service, for instance, received a starting annual pension of $60,000 with annual raises, Hitt explained.

“This is an extremely generous benefit continued at taxpayer expense,” he said.

The state currently owes $43 billion to the Illinois Teachers Retirement System (TRS). For decades, the state has been responsible for contributing the employer share of teachers’ pension payments, but it repeatedly issued I.O.U.s in place of real payments.

In April, the TRS admitted the pension fund could be insolvent in 16 years. State TRS funding will exceed funding for Illinois’ largest education fund in just five years, the report said.

Shifting Costs to Recipients

Gov. Pat Quinn (D) proposed that since school districts employ teachers and set their salaries, the districts should bear the employer share of pension contributions.

The average cost to school districts in Illinois for picking up the employer share of pensions would be 3.7 percent of total expenditures.

Every unit of Illinois government, including Chicago Public Schools, pays the employer share of state pensions, notes John Tillman, the institute’s CEO.

“Only in K-12 education outside of Chicago is this not done,” he said.

The institute also recommends teachers contribute to their own retirement.

Teachers in two-thirds of Illinois school districts pay little or nothing toward their pensions, with districts paying the employee share. If school districts stopped this, 482 of 866 school districts would enjoy cost savings, the report said.

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 Women’s Forum. She is also a research fellow at the Independent Women’s Forum. She is also a research fellow at the Independent Women’s Forum.

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“Moms and Schools Survey” and related documents, Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice: http://EdChoice.org/MomsPoll
N.J. Legislature Sends Tenure Bill to Gov. Christie

By Sally Nelson

After almost two years of debate, the New Jersey General Assembly unanimously approved legislation to reform teacher tenure. Gov. Chris Christie (R) signed it into law in August.

The bill would require annual evaluations that incorporate evidence of student achievement growth before a teacher becomes eligible for tenure. Teachers would become eligible for tenure after four years of positive ratings, rather than the current three.

“With this legislation, we will overhaul a century-old tenure law and craft a new policy that will create supports for our teachers [and] an ongoing evaluation system ... that will help strengthen our educators.”

M. TERESA RUZI
STATE SENATOR
ESSEX, NEW JERSEY

“[W]e will overhaul a century-old tenure law and craft a new policy that will create supports for our teachers [and] an ongoing evaluation system ... that will help strengthen our educators.”

“We will overhaul a century-old tenure law and craft a new policy that will create supports for our teachers [and] an ongoing evaluation system ... that will help strengthen our educators,” said bill sponsor state Sen. M. Teresa Ruiz (D-Essex).

Christie prioritized tenure reform this legislative session, but he had pushed for ending seniority rules, which the bill retains.

“Now is the time to build on this record of cooperation and results to put in place further reforms focused on our students by ending the flawed practice of last in, first out,” Christie said at the bill signing.

Measure Retains Seniority

Ruiz’s original bill proposed ending the “last in, first out” rule that requires schools to fire the most recently hired teacher when laying off employees. Lawmakers retained the current system, which uses seniority as the sole criterion when determining teacher retention, said New Jersey School Boards Association Executive Director Marie S. Bilik in a statement.

“School leaders need to consider a teacher’s job performance when recommending who would retain a position. They don’t have the authority to do that now, and they still won’t have it under the current version of S-1455,” Bilik said.

That tenet was removed after unions made it their “do or die” issue, said Jerry Cantrell, president of the Common Sense Institute of New Jersey.

“I’m disappointed that it didn’t go through in its initial format. But it’s progress,” Cantrell said.

Christie’s administration supported Ruiz’s efforts to get as much of her original bill as possible through the legislature, spokesman Michael Drewniak said.

See As Important First Step

Though Ruiz’s original plan did not make it through the legislature, the bill provides the important first steps for reforming tenure, an outdated nineteenth century idea, Cantrell said.

“It imposes a different evaluation structure, which is a positive. I don’t know if it’s the end-all-be-all at this point in time, but it does in fact put more teeth into the evaluation process,” he said.

The bill’s success hinges on how principals and supervisors enforce it, he said.

“It has increased the individual visibility of teachers, which is obviously going to be a good thing,” Cantrell said.

“As a nation, we are recognizing that the current structure and the current system are not realistic in this day and age.”

Sally Nelson (sallynelson7@gmail.com) writes from Hillsdale, Michigan. She is pursuing an English degree from Hillsdale College’s honors program.

PODCAST INFO

Hispanics are concerned about education. Seventy-five percent—it is little surprise so many the national average of approximately With current graduation rates for Latino Latino Education Crisis With current graduation rates for Latino students at 50 percent—far lower than the national average of approximately 75 percent—it is little surprise so many Hispanics are concerned about education.

Latino Voters: Education More Important than Immigration

By Rachel Sheffield

How important is education to Latino voters? More important than immigration, according to a recent poll released by the American Federation for Children and Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options.

Forty-nine percent of likely voters and 58 percent of Latino voters polled said the presidential candidates should speak more about how they will improve education. Fifty-three percent of Latino voters and 43 percent of voters overall said improving education is crucial to improving the nation’s economy.

“The commonly touted narrative that the key to Latino voters is entirely centered around immigration misses the realities facing so many Latino families, who are desperate for better educational options for their children,” said Malcom Glenn, communications director for the American Federation for Children.

Democratic polling firm Beck Research polled 750 likely voters, 117 of whom were Latino. Sixty-nine percent of Latinos and 57 percent of all likely voters supported vouchers.

Latino Education Crisis
With current graduation rates for Latino students at 50 percent—far lower than the national average of approximately 75 percent—it is little surprise so many Hispanics are concerned about education.

“Hispanic families are desperately looking for bold action to improve our country’s educational system,” said Israel Ortega, editor of The Heritage Foundation’s Libertad.org.

Many Hispanic families live where local public schools are not meeting their children’s needs, says Julio Fuentes, HCREO’s president and CEO. School choice is the only way such families can obtain quality education, he said.

“Hispanic families understand receiving a quality education is the key to unlocking the path to achieve the American Dream, and that is why Hispanics are supportive of ways of increasing accountability and transparency through greater choice,” Ortega said.

Support for School Choice
The poll revealed Latinos support school choice by wide majorities. Ninety-one percent of likely voters said some form of voucher or tax credit scholarship should be available to all families. Sixty percent of Latino voters agreed “giving parents more choice of schools will improve the education system.”

“These poll results underscore not only the supreme importance of expanding school choice to communities nationwide, but also the strong demand for expanded options,” Glenn said.

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Ten Thousand Students Apply for Vouchers in Louisiana

Continued from page 1

voucher program statewide. Under the expansion, low-income students attending Louisiana public schools rated C, D, or F by the Louisiana Department of Education may apply for scholarships to 125 participating private schools. At those schools, tuition averages $6,100. Louisiana spends an average of $10,600 for each public-school child.

The Louisiana Department of Education is working to ensure public confidence in the program by devising rigorous criteria for participating private schools, said Barry Landry, a DOE spokesman. The criteria, released in July, specify voucher students old enough for state tests must take them (grades 3 and up). The averaged results for each school will be publicly posted, and if a private school’s voucher students repeatedly fail to meet state standards the school will not be allowed to enroll more. If that situation persists for four years, the school cannot accept voucher students until it demonstrates improved academics.

Vested Interests Scream ‘Stop’
Two teachers unions—the Louisiana Federation of Teachers and the Louisiana Association of Educators—and the Louisiana School Boards Association filed separate but consolidated lawsuits against the program, claiming allowing parents to spend public dollars at private schools is unconstitutional.

Two New Orleans parents, the Black Alliance for Educational Options, and the Alliance for School Choice responded by joining the defense, represented by the Institute for Justice, which has successfully defended school choice nationwide for decades.

“Louisiana’s program has the potential to be the second largest scholarship program in the United States, second only to Indiana’s statewide program,” said Institute for Justice Senior Attorney Dick Komer. “It is IJ’s mission to see that it isn’t killed.”

A hearing on the suit is set for October 15. In early July a Baton Rouge judge rejected a motion to delay the program on grounds the state’s funding for it did not get the constitutionally required number of votes in the House.

“It’s time to return our focus to the classroom and to our children. This decision will help our state to do that,” Landry said. “The number of Louisiana families that have applied for scholarships makes implementing this program an issue of moral responsibility.”

Komer is optimistic the voucher program will continue even if ruled unconstitutional.

“Legal challenges are limited to procedural and funding issues,” he said, “such that an adverse decision could be remedied by legislative action quickly, perhaps even without any interruption to the program.”

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.

PODCAST INFO
Indiana Vouchers Boost Public School Funds

By Ben DeGrow

 Barely more than a year old, Indiana’s voucher program has grown in popularity, sent an extra $4 million to public schools, and yielded clear evidence of taxpayer savings.

In May the Indiana Department of Education paid $4 million extra to school districts and charter schools statewide because of the voucher program. A special fund absorbed the state moneys that did not follow voucher students to their chosen private schools, and the funds were divided among all public districts by a predetermined formula.

The outlays demonstrate how school choice provides tangible taxpayer savings, said Leslie Hiner, state programs director for the Indianapolis-based Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice. She notes the direct payout makes Indiana vouchers unique.

“Other places will talk about savings, yet there’s no real physical representation of that,” she said. “Every citizen in the state will understand what it means when somebody gets a check.”

Based on family size and income, eligible students receive scholarships worth from 50 to 90 percent of the state’s per-pupil aid, with more money going to lower-income students. Individual scholarships for 2011–12 ranged from about $2,400 to $6,900, depending on a student’s resident district.

“In Indiana, we are not so much focused on funding school buildings in districts as we are [on providing] education for students,” said department spokeswoman Stephanie Sample, noting the voucher law requires the payout. “[Schools] don’t need money to educate students they don’t have in their buildings.”

Growing Enrollment

The number of Indiana students receiving Choice Scholarships will increase for the 2012–13 school year, but department officials and advocates are reluctant to guess how much. Nearly 4,000 students successfully applied for a voucher in the program’s first year, which began directly after Gov. Mitch Daniels signed the program into law in April 2011.

“Families had a little over two months to sign up,” Sample said. “They’ve got a lot more time this year.”

The number of applicants for 2012–13 by early June already had surpassed the first year’s total for the nation’s largest operating voucher program. Hiner says families have spread the news about the program by word of mouth.

“It is not a quick process to get this information into the hands of all parents in the state,” she said. “Yet it’s the proper way it should proceed. [Parents] learn about it and study it, then they make a decision about whether it’s right for them.”

The program is capped at 7,500 students this fall and 15,000 in 2013–14. It has no cap after that.

‘Huge Win’ for Community

One of the program’s larger magnets, the nondenominational Liberty Christian School in Anderson, took in nearly 120 Choice Scholarship students in 2011–12, an enrollment boost of 20 percent. Ten of them left the school or were asked to leave. Superintendent Jeremy Cowin said the program has opened his K-12 school’s doors to more families with limited finances and to more students with special learning needs.

“It has really helped our school to look a little more like the community we serve,” said Cowin.

Liberty Christian has encountered a few minor frustrations from unexpected state requirements, he said, and the influx of students has introduced a need for staff to work harder to identify and address a range of learning gaps. But overall, Cowin believes the experience has been positive.

“For the Anderson community, it’s a huge win all around,” he said. “Families here have choices that they didn’t have before.”

Hiner says Indiana’s nascent choice program is spurring expansion of private education into new areas to meet student needs. Talk of new school creation has centered on models outside the traditionally successful networks of Catholic and Lutheran schools.

“It is encouraging that people are having these conversations,” said Hiner. “Much of that is very parent-driven.”

Building Confidence

About 280 Choice Scholarship students were approved to receive Choice Scholarship students in 2011–12. To become eligible, a school must verify its state accreditation, agree to administer state tests to all students, and receive the same letter grade designations as public schools. A nonpublic school that earns two consecutive D or F grades will no longer be allowed to participate.

“If they’re getting state money, we want to hold them to the same high bar,” Sample said.

Liberty Christian students achieved 100 percent proficiency on the state’s early literacy IREAD test, but Cowin believes his school’s other assessment scores will “take a hit” in the short term because of several extra incoming students with academic struggles.

The first batch of performance data under Indiana’s new comprehensive accountability system for both public and voucher schools was scheduled to be released in August. Meanwhile, state leaders and supporters await a state supreme court hearing reviewing the voucher law. A district court in August 2011 upheld the program as constitutional.

Hiner says the Hoosier State’s successful voucher launch has put to rest the claims of choice opponents.

“This should give confidence to parents, legislators, and community leaders in other states that dire concerns of opponents that somehow everything would go wrong, it’s simply not true.”

LESLIE HINER
STATE PROGRAMS DIRECTOR
FRIEDMAN FOUNDATION FOR EDUCATIONAL CHOICE

“This should give confidence to parents, legislators, and community leaders in other states that dire concerns of opponents that somehow everything would go wrong, it’s simply not true,” she said. “It just requires good people stepping up to do the right thing by their kids.”

Ben DeGrow (ben@i2i.org) is senior education policy analyst for the Independence Institute, a free-market think tank in Denver, Colorado.

Indiana Department of Education, Choice Scholarships: http://www.doe.in.gov/improvement/school-choice/choice-scholarships

INTERNET INFO
School System Funding Woes
In June 2011 the Texas legislature went into a special session to confront a $4 billion budget gap largely related to education. It faces another budget gap in the coming 2013 legislative session. In the meantime, a coalition of school districts has sued the state for more money, saying it doesn’t provide them enough to properly educate students. That and several other related lawsuits are set to be heard in October.

Texas spends an average of approximately $8,000 per student. The state supreme court has previously suggested the state ought to reorient its school funding mechanism, and if it hears the case it may direct the legislature to do so.

Terry says tough budget realities combined with clear voter support could provide momentum for the legislature to consider the well-documented savings of school choice measures such as Taxpayer Savings Grants (TSGs).

The proposition voters approved read, “The state should fund education by allowing dollars to follow the child instead of the bureaucracy, through a program which allows parents the freedom to choose their child’s school, public or private, while also saving significant taxpayer dollars.”

Terry says TSGs fit that description. In 2011, TSG legislation would have given parents of public school students up to 60 percent of the state cost to educate a student, or $5,143, to send their child to private school. A study by The Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News, concluded the program would save the state $2 billion over its first two years.

Legislative Changes Coming
Texas House Education Committee Chairman Rob Eissler (R-The Woodlands) lost to a primary challenger. Senate Education Committee Chairman Florence Shapiro (R-Plano) will retire in January 2013. The leadership shift will mean an opportunity for school choice advocates, Terry said.

“What’s going to be key is the Tea Party group,” Terry said. “That’s a new part to this entire equation we haven’t had on past votes on vouchers.”

Wis. Gov. Walker Wins Recall by Decisive Margin

By Joy Pullmann

Wisconsin’s Scott Walker became on June 5 the first U.S. governor to win a recall election, with 54 percent of ballots cast in his favor and voter turnout at approximately 57 percent.

Walker, Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch, and four Republican state senators faced the recall because of policies they implemented to restrict collective bargaining for state employees and require them to pay portions of their retirement benefits. To fill a $3.6 billion state budget deficit, Walker cut education spending and gave local districts the policy options to make up the difference.

With 99 percent of precincts reporting, all the recalled officials had retained their seats except for state Sen. Van Wanggaard.

“Voters really do want leaders who stand up and make the tough decisions,” Walker said in his victory speech. Walker stopped his victory crowd when they began to boo his opponent, Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett (D).

“Tomorrow we are no longer opponents,” he said.

Governor Improved Popularity

Barrett took 46 percent of the recall vote. Walker’s 54 percent share of the recall vote was higher than in the general election he won in 2010.

The Wisconsin recall attained national significance after protestors occupied the state capitol building and its streets for 15 months and 14 Democratic state senators fled the state attempting to forestall the bargaining curbs.

“Everyone in Wisconsin has been sick of hearing ‘This is what democracy looks like’ [from protesters], and we finally got to see it,” said Christian D’Andrea, an education policy analyst with the MacIver Institute. He said the mood among protestors in Madison, however, was still “optimistic.”

“The solidarity singers are back out,” he noted.

Teachers Unions Lose

State membership in the American Federation of Teachers, the second-largest teachers union in the country, has dropped by approximately one-third since Walker signed Act 10, the law limiting collective bargaining and ending automatic union dues withdrawals from state workers’ paychecks, according to the Wall Street Journal.

The Wisconsin Education Association, the state’s National Education Association chapter, laid off 42 staff- ers in August 2011, suggesting similar membership losses, said union watchdog Mike Antonucci. The NEA is the nation’s largest teachers union.

“We must recognize Wisconsin as the nation’s leader in reversing the archaic practice of forced unionism.”

GARY BECKNER
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN EDUCATORS

local and state education officials could not “even have a discussion about certain reforms” until Walker came to office, said Jim Bender, president of School Choice Wisconsin. For example, the unions’ refusal to tie teacher evaluations to student test results lost the state a chance at millions of dollars in federal Race to the Top grants.

Walker signed bills expanding the Milwaukee voucher program to neighboring Racine, altering the state’s testing and accountability system, and allowing local officials to rethink their budgets for employee pay and benefits. The changes allowed school districts to save hundreds of millions of dollars.

“Now it’s clear those reforms will be here in the long term,” Bender said. “You’ll see local districts experimenting with reforms that work for them and their districts, which is something we desperately need.”

Choice Expansion Likely

Because the state legislative session has concluded until January 2013, the top education issue for the state in coming months—changes to the state’s testing and federal accountability system to receive a federal No Child Left Behind waiver—will be largely administered by the state Department of Public Instruction, D’Andrea said. He said it is likely state Sen. John Lehman, chairman of the Senate Education Committee, will hold some out-of-session hearings on the topic.

Given Walker’s win and a “75 percent chance” Republicans pick up four more state Senate seats and hold onto the state Assembly in November, Bender said, more school choice expansion is likely in 2013.

“You will see more flexibility, more ideas such as open enrollment, expanding charters, virtual learning, expanding the voucher program,” he said.

Meanwhile, he said, school districts have begun to use the flexibility Walker’s policies have offered to experiment with merit pay for teachers, bid out health insurance, and rethink school structures. Oconomowoc, for example, reduced its high school teaching staff from 60 to 45 teachers, raising the baseline salary $14,000 and increasing their starting salaries to $50,000. It also required teachers to work four teaching blocks per day instead of three, achieving savings of $540,000.

The district is “offering more than any other district in the region, possibly the state, for more work,” D’Andrea said. “A promising experiment.”

Relieved It’s Over

Wisconsin residents and school leaders are largely relieved the recall is over, Bender said.

“We’re thrilled—no two ways about it,” he said. “After eight years of [former Gov.] Jim Doyle, where nothing was going to change and you’re constantly on the defensive on education reform, now you actually have a chance of getting choice passed. It’s like those Claritin commercials where you take the film away and everything becomes clear.”

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“All of this is managing editor of School Reform News and a research fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute.
Nation's Largest Teachers Union Sees Unprecedented Membership Decline

By Ben DeGrow

The nation’s largest teachers union experienced an unprecedented decline in membership last year, a development with potentially large impacts on classrooms and state politics.

The Education Intelligence Agency’s Mike Antonucci, a longtime independent reporter with multiple union sources, reports a net loss for the National Education Association of more than 87,000 active and retired members. This leaves the NEA with nearly 3 percent fewer dues-payers in 2012 than in 2011. The NEA membership peaked in 2009 at more than 3.2 million. After a modest decline in 2010, EIA estimates the latest plunge represents a loss of $11 million in dues revenue. National teachers union leaders are faced with the prospect of laying off their own unionized employees.

“Unions make a lot of money, but they’re not practiced at cutting costs. Even the loss of a little money in the overall scheme is a big deal,” said Antonucci.

Losing Incentives

Prominent among the causes of the membership decline are a series of state-level reforms—most conspicuously in Wisconsin and Tennessee—that removed some collective bargaining privileges for government employees.

Many teachers are attracted to local unions because of the negotiated protections they provide, said Hoover Institution Senior Fellow Terry Moe.

“But many teachers would prefer not to join their state union, and many more would prefer not to join their national,” he said.

With restrictions on the union’s capacity to serve as exclusive bargaining agents and to collect involuntary fees, “many teachers feel they have no incentive to belong to the union anymore,” Moe said.

Questioning the Costs

Tim Farmer, membership director for the Professional Association of Colorado Educators (PACE), says teachers in his state are growing more disenchanted with even the local union.

“Teachers are realizing that collective bargaining and being in a union is not as big a factor in determining salary and benefits as they’ve been led to believe,” he said.

Affiliated with the national nonunion Association of American Educators, PACE offers many benefits similar to those offered by a union, except bargaining and political activities, at a fraction of the price.

“As I talk with teachers, more and more are starting to question the return on their investment in the union,” said Farmer.

Impact from Layoffs

Education budgets were largely shielded from the recent recession by large infusions of federal stimulus funds in 2009 and 2010.

“What we’re seeing with teachers is basically what we should have been seeing two to three years ago,” Antonucci said. “They put off the day of reckoning.”

State-by-state NEA data are not yet available, but Antonucci said he expects states with mandatory unionism will show membership declines that correspond closely with employment attrition.

Ben DeGrow (ben@i2i.org) is senior education policy analyst for the Independence Institute, a free-market think tank in Denver, Colorado.
Some States Reconsider Common Core Involvement

By Lindsey Burke

A few states are reconsidering their commitment to the Common Core education standards adopted recently by 45 states under heavy federal incentives.

In the summer of 2010, 45 states committed to adopting the Common Core standards and related tests in math and English language arts. The standards comprise grade-by-grade lists of what students should know in each subject. With little public discussion, state boards of education agreed to adopt them, in large part due to incentives offered by the Obama administration.

More than $4 billion in competitive Race to the Top grants were partly conditioned on states adopting the standards and tests. More recently, the U.S. Department of Education conditioned No Child Left Behind waivers on states adopting standards only the Common Core met.

Given this federal involvement and recent revelations about the costs of overhauling state tests and textbooks and retraining teachers, some state leaders are reconsidering their commitment.

Utah plans to revise its involvement with Common Core tests and will likely downgrade from a “governing” member to an “advisory” member in a consortium working to create the tests. This will mean the state is no longer fully committed to using the tests by 2014–15. The Colorado Board of Education voted in April against joining the same consortium.

The Alabama state Senate passed a resolution in May to “encourage the State Board of Education to take all steps it deems appropriate, including revocation of the adoption of the [Common Core] standards if necessary, to retain complete control over Alabama’s academic standards, curriculum, instruction, and testing system.”

Growing Public Awareness

“There is a little more light being shed on the federal coercion behind Common Core adoption than there was when Race to the Top was in full effect. Unfortunately, it has come too late to stop most states from adopting the de facto federal standards,” stated Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom.

He continued, “Recent efforts by some states to ratchet down their commitment probably reflect moderately growing public awareness of the standards and the federal power behind them.”

More states may reconsider their involvement when further implementation takes place, he said.

“I don’t think there will be enough public awareness of the standards until states start putting the new tests in place. Then the public will notice, and the train will likely come off the tracks because states won’t rigorously apply the standards, or Washington will punish schools based on Common Core test scores,” McCluskey said.

The Colorado and Utah moves away from Common Core tests signal larger discontent with centralizing education, said Lance Izumi, director of education studies at the Pacific Research Institute.

“These state leaders are finding out that the Common Core is the catalyst for nationalizing education through national testing and a national curriculum, all of which will disempower governors, legislatures, local school boards, the taxpaying public generally, and parents specifically,” Izumi said.

Lindsey M. Burke (lindsey.burke@heritage.org) is an education policy analyst at The Heritage Foundation.
Charter School Enrollment Doubles in Minnesota

By Abigail Wood

Charter school K-12 enrollment has nearly doubled over the past decade in Minnesota, the first state to allow charter schools, according to a new analysis of state education department data by the Center for School Change.

The report shows nearly 19,000 more students enrolled in charter K-12 schools in 2011–12 compared with a decade before, while district enrollment declined by more than 45,000 students over the same period.

Most Minnesota K-12 students still attend district schools—there were 785,729 district students and 39,129 charter students in 2011—but the rising charter enrollment indicates a growing trend of parents choosing more flexible, responsive charter schools over traditional schools, said Stephanie Grisham, a National Alliance for Public Charter Schools spokesperson.

Charters’ growing popularity in Minnesota mirrors progress in the rest of the nation, said Joe Nathan, CSC’s director, who helped compose the study.

“A growing number of families are looking at new kinds of options,” Nathan said. “This is true in urban, suburban, and rural Minnesota, while in many states this is mainly an urban phenomenon. In Minnesota there are more youngsters going to suburban charters than urban charters.”

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

District Must Accept Parent Trigger Petition, California Judge Rules

Continued from page 1

parents signed a petition to convert Desert Trails to a charter school, some rescinded their signatures after a teachers union campaign, said Ben Boychuk, a policy advisor to The Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News. This dropped the total below the 50 percent line, the board argued, and it rejected the petition.

Superior Court Judge Steve Malone ruled that, according to the law, signatures cannot be rescinded and the district must accept the petition.

What Happens Next

The school board has 30 days from the July 23 ruling to vote on whether to approve the petition, Romero said. If the board rejects the takeover, it must cite reasons. It met July 25 but decided not to decide the matter at that time.

“They may be searching for ways to vote no. I think it’s a real stretch for them to concoct a reason to vote no,” Romero said.

Parents met to decide the school’s future on July 27. They already petitioned to convert it to a charter school, among the three options the law allows, and now must choose which charter school operator to hire, Romero said.

They released an eight-page letter of guidelines for potential school operators.

“All proposals are encouraged,” said Doreen Diaz, Desert Trails Parent Union coordinator, in a statement. Their goal, she said, is to have the converted school running for fall 2013.

The law also allows parents to petition for their school to close or have the principal and most staff replaced.

Boychuk watched parents bring their petition to the board.

“There were all these shenanigans with discounting signatures,” he said. “There was a lot of disappointment, and they needed a win, and now we’ve got sort of a win.”

Families Engaged in Education

The decision allows parents to take a more active role in their children’s education, said RiShawn Biddle, Dropout Nation editor and a contributor to the American Spectator.

“We talk about school choice being very important, but a lot of times the way we talk about school choice is walking away, basically escaping a school,” he said. “People want to have high-quality school options within their own neighborhood.”

Teachers unions’ opposition to the ruling comes as no surprise, he said.

“The culture within education is one in which parents are there basically to [help with] homework and staff field trips, and that’s not necessarily what parents want,” he said. “For parents to be engaged in education, they must actually have power to shape what their kids learn and how their kids learn and the environment where their kids learn. They have to have a leading role in education.”

Test of Parent Power

The Parent Trigger law changes the relationship between families and school districts, Biddle said.

 “[School districts] up to this point have been able to ignore almost all parents, except those with enough money and enough political clout to demand what they want. This is particularly for poor families who really don’t have a lot of clout in education,” he said. “It gives them a level playing field where there hasn’t been any.”

The ruling is important historically, Boychuk said, and may set a precedent across the country.

“The trigger concept is sound, but it’s untested. Now with Adelanto, we’ll have a test case,” he said. “It should give [parents and organizers] a model of what to do and not do. A lot of this is really uncharted territory, and these parents are not professional activists or community organizers. They’re just parents, and they have real jobs and they have to take care of their kids.”

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

Podcast Info

Nevada Data Show More Spending Doesn’t Improve Education

By Victor Joecks

Union bosses and other liberals have long argued Nevada and the nation must spend more on K-12 education to increase student achievement.

In one sense, at least, their arguments have been incredibly successful: Nevada has mirrored the nation by nearly tripling inflation-adjusted, per-pupil spending in the past 50 years.

Student achievement, however, has stagnated, and Nevada’s graduation rate—according to Education Week—has plummeted to 44.3 percent. Spending more, even a lot more, has not produced the student learning gains liberals have promised.

Parroting a Disproven Refrain

Although disproven, union bosses continue to parrot this refrain. On its Web site, the Clark County Education Association writes, “Funding for education has been shortened by Nevada’s legislators for too long. Their lack of leadership and courage to adequately fund public education has resulted in our state ranking dead-last in the nation in investment in education, resulting in the hampering of innovation and excellence.”

The local union’s state-level affiliate, the Nevada State Education Association, is taking direct action to force additional spending hikes. The Las Vegas Sun reports the NSEA is preparing to file a business tax initiative to increase education funding by $1 billion.

This union-boss effort would only further entrench the failing status quo. The reality is that little or no correlation exists between spending and student achievement.

Nationwide Pattern

Nevada isn’t the only state to have dramatically increased education spending in previous decades with little to no increase in student achievement to show for it. Nationwide, inflation-adjusted per-pupil education spending has increased by about 140 percent in the past 40 years, and the number of teachers per pupil has increased by more than 70 percent.

Student achievement, however, has been hovering near the same level—or even decreasing—for decades.

My state-by-state analysis with colleague Geoffrey Lawrence shows there is no statistically significant correlation between spending and student achievement. This is seen when Fiscal Year 2009 spending on current expenditures is compared with reading and math scores on the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

A simple regression analysis reports the correlation of state education spending with student performance on the NAEP fourth-grade reading and math tests. In these cases, the correlation between spending and student achievement in reading and math is, at best, only 3.18 percent and 1.82 percent, respectively. This is an extremely weak nonexistent relationship.

Fostering Public Ignorance

Some liberal commentators have claimed that because some top-spending states, such as Connecticut, New Jersey, and Vermont, boast high test scores, there is a correlation between spending and student achievement. These liberals, however, ignore the top-spending locales that have low test scores, such as Washington, DC, Alaska, and New York.

When little to no correlation exists between spending and student achievement, such scores are exactly what you’d expect. Some top-spending states score well; others score poorly. The converse is also true: Some low-spending states score well, while others score poorly.

This analysis and others indicate there is virtually no relationship between spending and student achievement—much less a causal relationship. Nonetheless, union bosses and liberals, relying on the public ignorance they have helped foster, have falsely claimed for decades there is a causal relationship between these variables.

Tragedy of Falsehood

The real tragedy of these falsehoods is not found in numbers or statistics. It is found in the face of a schoolchild who is stuck in a failing school, year after year. Fifty years of evidence in 50 states have demonstrated emphatically that spending more is not the path to increased student achievement. The future of these states’ students—America’s children—requires legislators and voters to reject the lies of union bosses and institute proven school-choice reforms.

Victor Joecks (vjo@npi.org) is communications director at the Nevada Policy Research Institute.
By Joy Pullmann

On his office wall, Phil Kilgore has pasted “100 different stickies” to a United States map. Each marks where a group of people want to open a “classical” charter school.

In directing Hillsdale College’s charter school initiative, Kilgore said he has discovered a rising wave of ordinary citizens who hope to serve their country and neighbors by opening public schools committed to a lost tradition of rigorous cultural literacy and virtue.

“The fact that [public education] has gone off the rails over the past 75 years doesn’t mean it needs to be abandoned. It needs to be redeemed,” Kilgore said.

Charter schools are independent public schools, legal in 41 states. They must enroll all comers, charge tuition to the state rather than parents, and meet state and federal academic standards.

Lawmakers envision them as “laboratories for reform,” hoping their flexibility and mission orientation would give families tailored alternatives to traditional schools and give traditional schools incentives for improvement.

“Based on our research, we would describe the growth of classical education as bordering on explosive,” said David Kern, creative director of the CiRCE Institute, a classical research and support network. “It seems to be having an impact beyond schools that self-identify as classical.”

Kern identifies growing interest among religious and international communities, homeschoolers, and charter networks, noting publications and support materials have been “selling like hotcakes” in the past decade.

Abandoned Wealth

In explaining classical education, Terrence Moore, an assistant professor of history at Hillsdale and former principal of a top-ranked U.S. public high school, says he likes to tell people, “This is the kind of education your grandparents received.”

Classical education gives youngsters knowledge opinion polls overwhelmingly reveal the U.S. public wants taught in schools: basic grammar and writing, U.S. and world history, rigorous math and science, and classic literature. It was prevalent until progressives demonized it as “rote learning” beginning in the early twentieth century, Moore says, and now most public schools do not offer content-oriented curriculum.

Instead, as University of Virginia education professor E. D. Hirsch began pointing out in the 1980s, public schools now largely abandon traditional teaching and curricula for “critical thinking skills” of little substance. Synthesizing years of psychological and pedagogical research, Hirsch demonstrated abandoning content for methods deprives children of the ability to think and communicate. One cannot build a tower with no material, he noted.

This deprivation falls hardest on poor and minority children because their families can rarely make up these deficits at home.

“If you’re only helping private and home schools, then you are only offering this wonderful thing to a narrow segment of students and abandoning 89 percent [who attend public schools],” Kilgore said. “That’s unconscionable.”

He said the republic cannot endure if its people cannot mentally and morally govern themselves, which classical education encourages.

Overcoming the Money Barrier

In many states, any group that can get its charter approved by the state or state-appointed authority can start a school. This means ordinary folks, with hard work and a robust vision, can tap the finances to start a school.

For many such interested individuals, the moral and civic opportunities far outweigh opportunities to make money.

“People think [a private school] is for a different kind of class of people,” said Tara Elkins, one of a team opening Estancia Valley Classical Academy in Moriarty, New Mexico. “We really believe this kind of education is necessary for everyone to help preserve liberty and a good life.”

Estancia Valley is one of three schools Hillsdale selected to give startup funds, training, and staff support from a Barney Family Foundation grant. Its nine founders met largely through church, only gradually shifting from their initial vision for a private, Christian school to a public, nonsectarian classical charter.

Lifting the Poor

A charter school conference Hillsdale held this summer attracted 70 people from 22 states. Attendees repeatedly expressed desires to lift up children who have otherwise terrible prospects.

Harmony Longenecker, a teacher and Florida mother of four who attended the conference, said she and her husband, a teacher, empathize with the “have-nots” they aim to serve.

“We have no money because we’re in education, so we can’t send our kids to private school,” she said, just like struggling single mothers or poor families.

Like any significant endeavor, starting a charter school is backbreaking. The three schools in Hillsdale’s first startup class, like the average high-quality charter school, have all taken two to three years of concerted effort among committed adults to open, which for the Texas and New Mexico schools happens this fall and for the Georgia school in fall 2013.

Estancia Valley’s team, all of whom had families or day jobs, “made dramatic sacrifices,” Elkins said. They often met several times a week in a home they began calling “the watering hole” to read, complete state paperwork, write, pore over potential textbooks, raise money, and more, Elkins said.

The state approved their 400-page application September 16, 2011. When the doors open in a month, Elkins will teach upper history.

“I’m thinking about ‘How much can these kids read? How much should I make them read?’” Elkins said. “We’re all nervous and excited. [Many of our students] live in utter poverty, and the system impoverishes them.”

Joy Pullmann is managing editor of School Reform News and a research fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute.
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