California Schools to Train Kids to Sell Obamacare

By Loren Heal

The Los Angeles Unified School District will use a state grant to train teens to promote Obamacare to family members.

Covered California, the state’s health insurance exchange, announced grants of $37 million on May 14 to promote the nationally unpopular law. LAUSD will receive $990,000. The district listed as a primary outcome for its project, “Teens trained to be messengers to family members.”

Covered California spokeswoman Sarah Soto-Taylor said staff have not questioned that goal.

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Common Core Testing Costs Increase; Georgia Withdraws

By Bailey Pritchett

It will take only three more states to withdraw from the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers national Common Core tests to jeopardize the group’s $186 million federal grant.

On July 22, Georgia announced its withdrawal from PARCC after the organization released a new cost estimate of $29.50 per student. PARCC is one of two federally funded national testing consortia creating Common Core tests due in 2014–2015. With Georgia’s withdrawal, it now has 18 member states, while Smarter Balanced, the other testing consortium, has 24.

The Georgia Department of Education said in a statement it “will work with educators across the state to create standardized tests aligned to [the state’s] current academic standards in mathematics and English language arts for elementary, middle and high school students” and will “seek opportunities to collaborate with other states.”

Alabama, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Utah also have withdrawn from national Common Core tests. Florida’s Senate and House leaders have demanded their state do the same. Florida is the lead financial state for PARCC and coordinated its federal grant.

“PARCC received its grant on the condition that at least 15 states participate in its testing work. With Georgia’s decision, PARCC now has 18 members.”

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California Schools to Train Kids to Sell Obamacare

Continued from page 1

“We have confidence that the model LA Unified brought to the table will be successful in reaching our target population, which includes family members of students,” she said.

LAUSD also will use tax-paid staff to promote Obamacare through phone calls to students’ homes, in-class presentations, and meetings with employees eligible for Obamacare’s taxpayer-covered health care, the grant award says.

One in three Los Angeles students never graduates high school.

Unpaid Propagandizers
The district listed adult education students and part-time and contract employees as its target population.

Teens will be trained to be messengers not to those groups, but to their own families, to get more people enrolled in taxpayer-subsidized health care.

If the project is successful, Los Angeles families can expect more use of students to push government-preferred messaging.

“Teens are part of a ‘pilot’ program to test whether young people can be trained as messengers to deliver outreach and limited education to family and friends in and around their homes,” said Gayle Pollard-Terry, a LAUSD spokesman, in an email. “Teens will be educating adults that they already know (e.g., family or friends) and not other adults.”

‘Paid in the Rear’
Grant recipients like LAUSD will be held accountable by the state for fulfilling their promised activities for outreach, said Larry Hicks, another LAUSD spokesman.

“At a minimum, grantees will be required to submit to Covered California monthly, quarterly, and annual reports on their activities and progress towards agreed-upon outcomes. If project benchmarks are not met, grantees may be required to submit additional ad hoc reports upon Covered California’s request. Grantees will also be required to report any proposed adjustments to their approved outreach and education plan using the information management system. … Additionally, field monitors will be assigned to grantees to verify their progress,” Hicks said.

Pollard-Terry said the district is familiar with running grants like this one and federal ones of similar size: “This grant is ‘paid in the rear,’ so the funding will come based on performance. The district front-funds positions and we have the ability to start using existing staff for the most part.”

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.

Common Core Testing Costs Increase; Georgia Withdraws

Continued from page 1

PARCC’s estimate put its test costs at nearly three times more than Georgia’s current testing costs. Georgia’s Criterion-Referenced Competency Test costs $8 to $9 per student and assesses five subjects. PARCC will measure two subjects: mathematics and English.

In 2010, PARCC and Smarter Balanced compiled and released the testing costs of all their member states. A 2012 Brookings Institution report compiled their findings, among others, concluding most PARCC states spend close to $29.50 per student on math and English language arts annual testing.

PARCC’s new cost estimate, released July 22, stated at least half of PARCC states spend less than $29.50 on assessments per pupil. spokesman Chad Colby said PARCC does not have the costs of individual state math and language arts assessment sections for comparison.

Using the Brookings figures, the accompanying chart shows in the second column PARCC’s estimate of what each member state spends per test. The third column shows Brookings’ estimates for total per-pupil annual testing costs by state. States typically spend a third to a half of their testing budgets on math and English assessments. According to these data, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, New York, Tennessee, and possibly Kentucky’s current math and English tests are cheaper.

The current estimate updates PARCC’s initial, broader projections of “a low of $17–$18 per student per year to a high of $45–$50 per student per year.” In its grant application to the U.S. Department of Education, PARCC estimated middle-of-the-road costs at $32.58 per student per year, if states contract out to score some constructed response items and do the rest by artificial intelligence. Constructed-response items are open-ended test questions that currently only humans, not machines, can grade, making them more time-consuming and costly.

PARCC received its grant on the condition that at least 15 states participate in its testing work. With Georgia’s decision, PARCC now has 18 members.

Americans Support Parent Trigger Laws, Poll Says

By Joy Pullmann

Forty-nine percent of U.S. adults support Parent Trigger laws, which give parents the ability to petition for reforms at their children’s failing school, and 40 percent oppose such laws, a new poll finds.

In urban areas, 57 percent of adults support a Parent Trigger law. California passed the first such law in 2010, and now seven states have some version of it on the books.

“Parents should be the architects of their own children’s future,” said Gloria Romero, author of the California Parent Trigger law. “Parents want real rights, not just to be asked to show up at bake sales to raise money for schools. When a school doesn’t work for their child, they deserve another choice.”

Of the 1,000 people polled, the largest proportion (27 percent) said the best Parent Trigger reform would be to offer children a voucher for a better private school. Twenty-six percent said the best option would be replacing staff. And 20 percent favored converting a failing school into a charter school.

Braun Research conducted the poll, which was sponsored by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is managing editor of School Reform News.
Sen. Rubio Champions Federal School Choice Bill

“If this bill ... [is] the kind of incentive that will help improve education in America and prepare our children for the jobs of tomorrow, without additional burdens on the American taxpayer.”

MARCO RUBIO
U.S. SENATOR - FLORIDA

By Isabel Lyman

U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio has gone on the road to promote a federal tax-credit scholarship bill aimed at helping poor children attend private schools. The program is about “giving parents more choices,” he says.

“This bill will incentivize investment in students and empower parents and K-12 students by allowing more educational opportunities, especially in low-income households that would otherwise not be able to afford it. It’s the kind of incentive that will help improve education in America and prepare our children for the jobs of tomorrow, without additional burdens on the American taxpayer,” Rubio said in a statement.

The Florida senator’s bill—known as the Educational Opportunities Act, or Senate Bill 297—would expand school choice by giving federal tax credits to businesses and individuals who donate to a nonprofit Scholarship Granting Organization (SGO).

The maximum allowable credit for a corporation would be $100,000. Depending on an individual’s filing status, his or her maximum credit would be $4,500.

To receive a scholarship from an SGO to a private school parents choose, a student must be enrolled in an elementary or secondary school that charges tuition and be part of a household whose annual income does not exceed 250 percent of the federal poverty guidelines, $87,525 annually for a family of five. SGOs would be required to publish test results and graduation rates for all participating students.

Fourteen similar tax-credit scholarship programs exist in states, according to the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice. In 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court decided they are constitutional.

Reality Check

Could such an innovative federal school choice bill pass a divided Congress and a president who has publicly stood against private school choice while sending his daughters to private schools? Rubio proclaimed the merits of the Educational Opportunities Act as a positive step forward for children in all states. Bush is a friend and mentor of Rubio.

Sammon also noted a diverse group of educational reform heavyweights who have praised the legislation, including Julio Fuentes, president of the Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options.

“Rubio’s bill would move the country a long way towards leveling the playing field for Hispanic students and families,” Fuentes said.

A May 2012 poll found 69 percent of Latinos support vouchers and they consider education a more important issue than immigration. Seventy-three percent of African-Americans support vouchers for low-income families, and 53 percent support vouchers for everyone, according to the most recent Harvard/EducationNext poll.

“We applaud [Rubio] for taking this bold step, and we are hopeful that our nation’s elected officials will see this bill as an opportunity to help our most vulnerable children and not allow partisan politics or ideologies to prohibit this bill from moving forward,” said Kenneth Campbell, president of the Black Alliance for Educational Options.

Feds vs. States

It’s not clear how federal tax-credit scholarships would affect states that already have such programs, said Jon East, a vice-president of Florida SGO Step Up For Students.

“The bill so far does not describe how the federal scholarship would work in states that, like Florida, have their own scholarships for low-income students,” he said. “One possibility might be that the federal scholarship could augment the state scholarship, because state scholarships seldom cover the full cost of tuition for these low-income families.”

Rubio proclaimed the merits of the Educational Opportunities Act in April at the Florida College Academy, a pre-kindergarten through grade nine religious school. The school has 37 tax-credit scholarship students, according to Florida education blog redefinED.

East is optimistic about Rubio’s effort: “We certainly see the Educational Opportunities Act as a positive step forward for children in all states who struggle academically and might benefit from another learning option.”

S. 297 has been referred to the Senate Finance Committee.

Isabel Lyman (izzylyman@aol.com) writes from Sandusky, Michigan.

Rotten Core

In 2010, 45 states adopted Common Core State Standards for education – without public debate or appropriate scrutiny. Now many states are having second thoughts. This booklet by Joy Pullmann, research fellow for The Heartland Institute, explains why Common Core is a bad choice for America.

Free online at heartland.org/issues/education or call 312/377-4000.
Ohio Introduces Vouchers Based on Family Income

By Emily Shelton

Ohio introduced its fifth school voucher program when Gov. John Kasich signed the state’s 2014–2015 budget.

Beginning this fall, the Income-based Scholarship Program will offer 2,000 kindergartners from families whose income is below 200 percent of the federal poverty line—up to $47,100 for a family of four—as much as $4,250 for private school tuition. The program will grow at the rate of one grade higher in each of the next 12 years, until the program extends through all of K-12.

Existing voucher programs in the state address failing public schools, especially schools in Cleveland, and special-needs students.

“This scholarship is different from Ohio’s four other voucher programs in that it is based solely on the household income of a child,” said Sarah Pechan, senior director of programs at School Choice Ohio. “Ohio’s leaders recognize that we can no longer afford to have our lowest-income students receiving subpar educational opportunities.”

The new voucher is a key effort in reforming Ohio education, said Kasich spokesman Rob Nichols.

Half of Ohio’s Kids Eligible

“After the full phase-in, well over half of Ohio students will be eligible for a state-funded scholarship to attend the private school of their choice,” Pechan said.

Participating students may continue to receive the voucher even if their household income rises above 200 percent of the poverty line, as long as they continue attending a chartered non-public school.

As with the other voucher programs, private schools choose whether they will participate. Pechan said she has received enthusiastic responses from private schools and expects hundreds to participate.

Testing Regulations

Voucher students must take the same state tests as their public school peers, and private schools with a voucher population of 65 percent or more will test non-voucher students as well, with the parents’ consent.

Administering state tests will not harm private schools, said Jeff Murray, manager of Ohio operations for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

“Most private schools I have interacted with are ready, willing, and able to administer whatever assessments the state calls for at any time,” Murray said. “They are confident that their curricula, teachers, support staff, and students—voucher or otherwise—are up to the challenges.”

Empowering Parents

Holli Stevenson’s daughter attends Cincinnati Waldorf School using another state voucher.

“There are a lot of families that cannot afford private education, so they are just kind of stuck. [The voucher] will open a lot of doors for families to find an alternative education opportunity for their kids,” Stevenson said.

Greg Lawson, a policy analyst at the free-market Buckeye Institute, also praised the voucher program’s emphasis on families, saying he hopes it sparks “a much longer conversation that money should follow the child, that it should be empowering parents, not empowering the bureaucracy. [The program] gives lower-income families a chance to be able to buy into the type of education they may have had challenges historically receiving.”

Emily Shelton (eshelton@hillsdale.edu) writes from Portland, Oregon.

Maine Rejects School Choice Expansion

By Shelby Sims

Maine lawmakers rejected a bill that would have helped children from low-income families enroll at public charter schools and take public money to private, religious schools that meet state standards.

Legislative Document 1529, sponsored by state Sen. Garrett Mason (R-Lisbon Falls), aimed to expand the state’s “town tuitioning” program. Currently only ten charter schools can operate in Maine under tight restrictions. Local school boards must approve and monitor new charter schools.

The expansion, which Gov. Paul LePage proposed, would have let higher-education institutions monitor charter schools, removed the limit of ten, and assisted students with transportation to boarding charter schools. More dramatically, the measure would have allowed students to take government money to private schools by funding students, not schools.

Town tuitioning—using local tax dollars to pay students’ way to schools outside rural counties that have no schools—has been legal in Maine and Vermont since the late 1800s. Religious schools participated in town tuitioning until 1981, when the legislature made that illegal, said Jason Bedrick, a Cato Institute policy analyst.

‘Bad Timing’

Amanda Clark, an education analyst for the Maine Heritage Policy Center, thought LD 1529 would pass. She noted an idea like this “has never come this far in Maine’s history.”

Ken Capron at the Maine Center for Constitutional Studies did not expect the bill to pass. If it had, Capron said, courts likely would have ruled it constitutional, but lawmakers “simply don’t have the support they need” to pass school choice legislation. He says “the timing is bad” because for the past two years both houses of the legislature have been controlled by anti-school-choice Democrats.

Clark says Democrats should love the proposal because it “allows economically disadvantaged children to have equal opportunity in education by permitting them to use their allocated dollars to enroll in the school of their choice.”

The bill would have sent private schools more money, Bedrick said, but students might pay the price in diversity and quality of instruction because schools that receive state money would have to comply with more mandates. The bill requires participating private religious schools to “comply with standards applicable to other private schools” but does not specify what those standards are. Maine does not require accreditation for private schools.

“Programs that utilize tax dollars and are administered by the government are more likely to come with increased regulations than school choice programs that rely on private donations,” Bedrick asserted.

The education committee rejected LD 1529 11–2 in May, then both legislative houses rejected the bill in June.

Shelby Sims is a School Reform News editing and reporting intern. She writes from Fort Wayne, Indiana.
Texas OKs Largest Charter Expansion Since 2001

By Alicia Constant

Texas is raising the state’s cap on the number of charter school operators from 215 to 305 by 2019, marking the largest charter school expansion since 2001—and the only school choice bill to pass in the state in 2013. Lawmakers also made it easier to close charters the state rates “academically unacceptable.”

“Taken as a whole, we think this is a major improvement,” said David Dunn, executive director of the Texas Charter Schools Association (TCSA). “There’s no shortage of parents who want in, and no shortage of operators wanting to open charter schools.”

Nearly 40 charter operators applied for the six new slots that opened this year through school closings, Dunn said. Currently, Texas has 209 charter school operators running 506 charter school campuses across the state.

Roughly 3 percent of the state’s 5 million schoolchildren attend charters and thousands more are on the waiting list. A TCSA survey put the waitlisted number at 102,000 students, but an Associated Press survey concluded the waitlist number at 102,000.

Increasing Accountability

By passing Senate Bill 2, the Texas legislature also made it easier for the Texas Education Agency to revoke charters for academically failing schools after three years of failure instead of four.

“Texas charter schools are over-represented at both ends of the scale,” Dunn said. “[Compared to other states], we have a greater percentage of charter schools at the top of academic performance, but unfortunately we also have a greater proportion at the bottom.”

In 2012, one in ten of Texas’s charter schools rated academically unacceptable. But the number of failing schools may be skewed by so-called “dropout recovery” schools; charters that help struggling students earn a high school diploma. High school students in a dropout recovery charter often enter at a fifth- or sixth-grade reading level, and they may have laid aside studies to work or to raise children. In dropout recovery schools, students may take more than four years to earn a diploma, as the charters have the freedom to tailor schedules to each student’s needs.

Changing Graduation Requirements

The legislature also passed a measure that would make it easier for students not planning to attend college—to many in dropout recovery charters—to get a diploma. The measure decreases the number of tests required for graduation from 15 to 5 and allows students to pick different diploma tracks.

A “foundation” diploma would require fewer classes in history, science, and math and would allow students to skip higher-level college preparatory classes such as Algebra 2. The plan may increase the number of failing students who can get a high school diploma, but that diploma will not meet the requirements for admission into Texas’s state-run colleges.

By contrast, students who desire to take extra classes can earn a “distinguished level” diploma, which comes with guaranteed enrollment in Texas state universities. Students also can earn “endorsements” in fields such as business, science, technology, engineering, and math.

Alicia Constant (aconstant@gmail.com) writes from Purcellville, Virginia.

Ohio Considers Property Tax Credit for People Who Homeschool Kids

By Isabel Lyman

Parents of homeschooled children will pay less in property taxes if a novel bill passes in Ohio.

Senate Bill 127, pegged to become effective in 2014, would give homeschoolers a tax credit equal to the proportion of property taxes on their home that fund their local school district.

“Home schooling requires an immense amount of parental involvement, which has many positive benefits for children, but it also involves a great deal of sacrifice,” said bill sponsor and state Sen. Kris Jordan (R-Powell), in a statement. “Families that elect to home-school their children often pay directly out of pocket for many of the materials and other items needed, and my proposal could help significantly in defraying some of these costs.”

A handful of states, including Minnesota and Louisiana, grant tax credits to homeschool families, but none currently offers homeschoolers property tax relief, according to the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA).

Kris Jordan
State Senator - OH

Ohio homeschoolers must submit annual education plans to their local superintendent, who can reject them. They also must administer state tests or create an alternative assessment approved by their district, according to HSLDA.

Christian Home Educators of Ohio suggested changes to the bill to prevent “unintended consequences,” said legislative liaison Melanie Elsey, but she declined to specify those concerns.

Government School Opposition

Public school advocates strongly oppose the credit.

“This just siphons away money that would be used for public education,” Jay Smith, a lobbyist with the Ohio School Boards Association, told Ohio Watchdog.

Ohio is home to approximately 24,000 homeschooled children. The 2013 Midwest Homeschool Convention, held in Cincinnati, attracted 15,000 people.

SB 127 has been assigned to the Senate Ways & Means Committee.

Isabel Lyman (izzylyman@aol.com) writes from Sandusky, Michigan.
Wisconsin Expands Voucher Program Statewide

By Mary Petrides Tillotson

Wisconsin’s legislature has expanded school vouchers statewide in a budget measure that passed the Senate by one vote.

The expansion will allow up to 500 low-income students in the 2013-2014 school year and up to 1,000 in following years to attend private schools, in addition to those already using vouchers in Milwaukee and Racine schools.

“I hope ... as the program grows over the next two years, that the people in the outstate areas of Wisconsin who aren’t as familiar with the program ... will have an opportunity to see that the program is successful. It makes a difference in the lives of families who find that their children are trapped in schools that are failing them,” said state Sen. Leah Vukmir (R-Wauwatosa).

The enrollment caps limit the number of vouchers to 0.02 percent of the state’s student body and allow only a 4 percent increase from the first year to the second in the number of students using vouchers, said Christian D’Andrea, an education policy analyst at the Wisconsin-based MacIver Institute.

‘Luck of the Draw’

Students are eligible for vouchers if their families earn no more than 185 percent of the federal poverty level, and only 1 percent of students in a given district can use vouchers, requiring a lottery system.

“It’s going to be a crapshoot, luck-of-the-draw situation for a lot of these students,” D’Andrea said.

A previous proposal from Gov. Scott Walker (R) would have expanded vouchers to any district of at least 4,000 students where at least two schools earn low marks on a state report card, which would have included nine districts.

The governor signed the measure and did not use his line-item veto to remove the enrollment cap, saying that was the deal he made with Republican lawmakers who otherwise would not have approved the bill in a mid-June vote.

“Our focus should be on the quality of education, regardless of school type,” said Walker spokesman Tom Evenson.

Per-pupil public school funding will increase by $900 by 2015, a measure added to soothe concerns about the program reducing funds available to public schools, D’Andrea said.

Wisconsin spends about $12,600 per pupil for public schools. The budget increased the voucher amount, which in Milwaukee and Racine was frozen at $6,400, to $7,000 per K-8 student and $7,800 per high school student.

Long-Term Possibilities

Vukmir said she’s a purist, but a realist, about school choice.

“I was disappointed: I wanted the expansion to go further, but I understand the dynamics and the political landscape,” she said. “I’m glad that we at least have a foothold for statewide expansion.”

The expansion will give lawmakers across Wisconsin an opportunity to see vouchers in action, Vukmir said.

“We’re used to it,” she said, noting her district is near Milwaukee and Racine. “It does not cause a lot of the problems opponents usually like to claim.”

When applications exceed the enrollment cap, lawmakers and voters will see the program’s benefits, says Brian Pleva, a Wisconsin government affairs associate for the American Federation for Children.

“One people realize that there’s way more than 500 or even 1,000 students throughout the state that are making the income eligibility requirements, they see that there’s a lot more people who would take advantage of this right, given the opportunity,” he said.

It’s tough to predict the future, D’Andrea noted, but “based on history, there’s a definite chance that we will see an expansion in the next decade.”

Meeting Individual Needs

Vouchers give children the opportunity to study at a school that may fit their individual needs, Pleva said, “especially if you’re a parent who’s stuck in a school that’s not working for your child and you can’t afford to move to a better school district and you can’t afford to pay the private school tuition.”

Vukmir said she hopes to see open enrollment for school choice programs in Wisconsin, for all students, not just those from low-income families.

“A parent who is not happy with their child in the school should have some ability—as taxpayers who are paying taxpayer dollars for those schools—to put their children in a school, public or private, or even to homeschool, and have resources covered for that,” she said.

Mary Petrides Tillotson

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Mary Petrides Tillotson
Pennsylvania to Consider Common Core Repeal

By Jenni White

Pennsylvania will revert to its state tests rather than use national Common Core tests, according to Pennsylvania Department of Education spokesman Tim Eller.

Lawmakers are also considering repealing the entire initiative.

Concerns voiced by residents and the state legislature prompted the switch, Eller said. The state will use a combination of Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) and Keystone Exams instead. The switch will “likely be completed in fall 2013,” he said.

“This is the governor’s office playing politics,” said Peg Luksik, a former teacher and founder of Founded on Truth, which opposes Common Core’s national math and English benchmarks for K-12. “The Keystones are all in the process of being aligned with the Common Core State Standards, so the testing consortia are irrelevant, really. The tests are what matters.”

Pennsylvania adopted the national Common Core standards on July 1, 2010—a month after they were published. Since then, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) has augmented them but has not explained what is different about the Pennsylvania version, which has created some confusion, Luksik notes.

The state legislature’s Democratic caucus in May came out against both the state tests and Common Core, saying the Core needed more funding to implement and PDE had changed saying the Core needed more funding to implement and PDE had changed its stance. The Keystone tests are what matters.”

Pennsylvaniaans opposed to Common Core, who packed a May hearing on the topic, are still “trying to get some kind of a feel from the legislature,” said Marilyn Reed, a cofounder of Pennsylvaniaans Against Common Core. “There are people out there just now hearing about this. Everyday people are signing up on our Facebook page. We need to keep moving forward.”

Jenni White is cofounder of Restore Oklahoma Public Education and a former public school science teacher.

“Illegal Core could force private and homeschool educators into government-dictated curricula and assessments that violate their academic freedom and rights of conscience.”

Pennsylvania House as a legislative package to stop Common Core:

• House Bill 1551 prevents further implementation of Common Core 60 days after the bill becomes law;
• House Bill 1552 exempts private, religious, and home schools from Common Core;
• House Bill 1553 prohibits the Pennsylvania Department of Education from imposing a national standardized assessment on any student in the commonwealth;
• House Bill 1554 prohibits the transfer of individual student data to the federal government; and

Public Uprising

Common Core is becoming a nationwide issue,” said state Rep. Will Pullmann (R-Abbotsford), HB 1551’s sponsor, Pennsylvania has seen a broad, bipartisan uprising against the Common Core Standards, with two state teachers unions also opposed, he noted. He sees the Common Core as “tying a teacher’s hands.”

State Rep. Stephen Bloom (R-Carlisle), HB 1552’s sponsor, said he is concerned Common Core’s near-monopoly over K-12 education would force private and homeschool educators into “government-dictated curricula and assessments that violate their academic freedom and rights of conscience.”

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The Pennsylvania Department of Education is imposing a national standardized assessment on any student in the Commonwealth;

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Repeal Bills Coming

In August, five bills hit the Pennsylvania House as a legislative package to stop Common Core:

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South Carolina Tries School Choice

By Evelyn B. Stacey

South Carolina has a new, temporary school choice law tucked within its recently passed state budget. The bill, H. 3710, authorizes nonprofit organizations to offer private K-12 scholarships to in-state students with special needs. Individuals and corporations that donate to the organizations receive state tax credits in return.

Gov. Nikki Haley (R) signed the bill on June 27 and its provisions are now in effect, according to House Education Committee staff. The final House vote on the bill “was high drama—it passed by one vote,” said state Rep. Robert Brown (D-Charleston), vice-chair of the Education and Public Works Committee. “The large majority of Democrats voted against the bill because of that provision.”

Lawmakers included the provision in the state budget after years of similar, independent bills failing to pass.

Opportunities for Families

The tax credits are capped at $8 million. The program allocates for each participating student up to $10,000 or the cost of private tuition, whichever is less, meaning about 800 students can participate. That is fewer students than are participating in the country’s largest special-needs scholarship, in Florida, where students receive an average of $6,900.

“This program helps about 0.1 percent of the students in South Carolina. It’s a very limited pilot,” said Jason Bedrick, a policy analyst for the Cato Institute.

The program expires after one year. Its scholarships can pay for public or private schools or other educational expenses.

“Next year we will see a bill coming out of the Senate to expand the program and make it permanent law,” Brown said, “now that the camel’s nose is under the tent.”

“What we know from more than 15 years’ experience with tax-credit scholarship programs nationwide is that the U.S. Supreme Court has declared them constitutional, they ease the burden on state and school budgets, and most important they expand options for students who desperately need them,” said Vicki Alger, a senior fellow at the Independent Women’s Forum in Washington, DC.

“Quite frankly,” she said, “every child has special educational needs in one way or another, and all parents deserve the freedom to pick the schools they believe are best.”

Since 2014 is an election year for all statewide offices, including governor and education secretary, Brown said, “you can bet this is going to be a campaign issue.”

Evelyn B. Stacey (ebstacey@yahoo.com) is a research assistant at the Hoover Institution. She writes from Palo Alto, California.
Colo. District Implements Innovative Teacher Pay Scale

By Logan Pike

A trailblazing Colorado school district has implemented a first-in-the-nation pay system that will reflect teachers’ value by rewarding hard work instead of seniority.

The Douglas County School Board will pay its best teachers up to 9.2 percent more than other teachers starting in 2013–2014. The plan injects $15.7 million into pay raises, bonuses, and other compensation starting this fall. No teacher will receive a pay cut.

Douglas County “continues to lead the nation in common-sense reforms. It makes perfect sense to pay teachers more in hard-to-fill positions, such as in math and science, to attract a larger pool of applicants,” said Pam Benigno, education policy director for the Denver-based Independence Institute. “The public is ready to support a pay system for teachers that is more aligned to the private market.”

The district’s pay-for-performance plan will tie salaries to teachers’ performance ratings, from “highly effective” to “ineffective.” It also will pay teachers according to five salary groups, with the highest pay for areas of greatest need or competition, such as high school math, and the lowest in easier-to-fill subjects such as gym.

U.S. school districts typically pay teachers according to years in the system and degrees earned, no matter what grade or subject they teach. Recently, some districts have explored bonuses for teaching in high-poverty schools and salary bumps for hard-to-fill positions such as special-education and calculus.

Douglas County, a wealthy suburban district, also offers virtual schools, charter schools, and the nation’s only district-run voucher system. The voucher plan is tied up in court.

Pay for Student Performance

States spend about $15 billion to give automatic pay increases to teachers who have earned advanced degrees, although there’s little evidence to suggest this improves education, according to Georgetown University researcher Marguerite Roza, who examined 2007–2008 data.

The average pay increase under Douglas County’s new system is 4 percent, half of which will be an ongoing permanent pay increase and the other half a one-year, one-time bonus. The district also has agreed to cover a $2.2 million annual increase to state pension contributions and a $1.2 million increase in health insurance costs for all teachers. With those benefit increases, the average teacher salary jumps 5.2 percent.

“We want to continue to attract and retain the very best. These increases are very much deserved by our staff. We value the hard work of our employees and their dedication to our students,” said Douglas County Board of Education President John Carson.

The new system requires evaluations of all teachers and principals starting this school year. When the evaluation is fully implemented, 50 percent of a teacher’s assessment will come from student test scores. Tenure, which a teacher can earn only after three sequential years of positive evaluations, will now also be lost after two consecutive years of poor ratings.

Salaries for teachers in the lowest bracket will rise to $61,000. In the highest bracket, special-education therapists can earn up to $94,000.

Logan Pike (heartlandlogan@gmail.com) is a communications intern at The Heartland Institute.
THE ABCs of SCHOOL CHOICE

The comprehensive guide to every private school choice program in America

“There isn’t a doubt in my mind that Jaevion is exactly where he needs to be in order to thrive academically and mature spiritually, and it’s all possible because of the voucher program.” - Jeronna, whose son, Jaevion, is participating in Indiana’s Choice Scholarship Program

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Feds May Raise Phone Taxes to Fund Common Core Test-Taking

“The networks were all built to handle one-tenth of the demand that they’re asked to be able to handle. ... We’re talking about a world where the network is going to be mission critical ... if computers and networks stop working, learning will stop.”

EVAN MARWELL, CEO, EDUCATION SUPERHIGHWAY

By Ashley Bateman

The Obama administration may raise taxes on everyone’s phone lines by about $5 per year to increase K-12 tech subsidies because most schools cannot afford to administer the computerized Common Core tests coming out in 2015.

President Barack Obama announced the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) will likely overhaul the schools and libraries universal service support program, commonly known as E-Rate. He also asked the U.S. Department of Education to use federal funding to give teachers more training in using technology.

Telecom observers expect the FCC to propose new rules in an extensive document typical of federal regulation-making, said Douglas Levin, executive director of the State Educational Technology Directors Association.

“It will probably include program reforms,” Levin said. Although Congress oversees the FCC, administration officials told Education Week they believe the agency can change the program without Congress this time.

Established in 1996, E-Rate charges telecommunications companies for long-distance service, including cell lines, and uses the resulting money to subsidize, among other things, school requests for phone lines, broadband Internet, and internal networks. On a conference call with reporters, Obama administration officials estimated the cost of E-Rate changes at $5 per phone line.

Inadequate Infrastructure, Funding

The nonprofit Education Superhighway has sampled K-12 schools’ connectivity levels and bandwidth speed nationwide through 350,000 tests in 18 states, for a representative sample of 15 percent of U.S. schools.

Its research shows about 59 percent of schools have enough bandwidth to administer basic computer tests, but only 23 percent have enough bandwidth to handle online tests and textbooks.

Even fewer will have sufficient bandwidth for the tests by 2017 based on projected growth of usage. By the 2017–18 school year, no Common Core tests will be available offline.

“The networks were all built to handle one-tenth of the demand that they’re asked to be able to handle,” Education Superhighway CEO Evan Marwell said. “That creates issues and schools are going to have to catch up. We’re talking about a world where the network is going to be mission critical ... if computers and networks stop working, learning will stop.”

In the 1990s, Marwell said, about 1.5 million students and educators used computers in K-12 schools. Education policies today now expect computer use by all 55 million in that sector.

“E-Rate today provides funding to get bandwidth to the school door, but schools can’t rely on E-Rate to fund the LAN and WiFi equipment they need to get that bandwidth to the classroom,” Marwell said. “That is one of the fundamental reasons that E-Rate needs to be modernized.”

Huge Appetite for Funds

The program covers four categories: phone and Wide Area Networks, Internet access, internal connections, and basic maintenance.

The first two services are considered priority one and the others priority two. Priority one services are financed first for the poorest schools that apply.

“Since the beginning of the program, there have been more demands for funding than the program has,” Marwell noted.

All priority one requests must be filled before any priority two requests can be considered. This past year, priority one requests exceeded the program’s $2.33 billion annual budget. Total requests this year were nearly $5 billion.

“This means no priority two requests will get funded, except for the fact that there is rollover funding, money allocated in the past years that districts have not spent,” Marwell said.

Reforming Infrastructure, Processes

The cost of updating the E-Rate program may delay action, Levin said.

“Everyone expects there will be some component of an expansion of dollars,” Levin said. “What’s not known at this point is whether this will be permanent or temporary. It may be there will be a shifting of resources within the universal service programs, reprioritization, or there may be new collections.”

More than a quarter of the money E-Rate gave schools from 1998 to 2006, $5 billion, was not disbursed on schedule, and the program does not evaluate performance, according to a 2009 Government Accountability Office study. The report also noted the program is so complicated many districts choose not to apply; others pay consultants to advise their applications.

In June, acting FCC Chairwoman Mignon Clyburn recommended increasing cost-effectiveness when funding, increasing oversight, increasing dependence on data in decision-making, and drawing more heavily on local public and private officials, organizations, and businesses.

“To ensure a robust future for our children, we must equip them with the necessary tools to compete and flourish in an increasingly global and high tech economy,” Mignon said in a June statement.

The FCC’s plan may be detailed or intentionally vague, hoping to work out more details through the public comment period, Levin said.

“Some think this process will happen quickly, others think this may be somewhat protracted because the conversations about new money whether it’s permanent or temporary are going to get complicated and certainly the industries who are involved in this will lobby on it,” Levin said.

E-Rate and Common Core

Although Common Core implementation demonstrates schools’ lack of technology, the trend for technology-based assessments was well underway before the new standards, Levin said.

“Schools are relying more and more on broadband Internet … for core functions,” Levin said. “We can provide much richer and better resources to kids and teachers … but it does require an infrastructure.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
Arizona Expands Accounts for K-12 Education

By Ashley Bateman

Sixteen thousand more Arizona children can get double the money in personal K-12 savings accounts thanks to a law signed this summer by Gov. Jan Brewer.

“Gov. Brewer has long championed school choice as a top education priority for the state,” said Ann Dockendorff, Brewer’s spokeswoman. “The governor sees these accounts as a valuable tool to expand educational opportunities for children with disabilities or unique needs.”

Education savings accounts (ESAs) give parents control over their child’s state education funds by depositing them into an audited account they control. They can use the money for any eligible education expense, such as books, tutoring, tuition, or therapy and can roll money over year to year all the way into college tuition.

“The funding from these programs is in the hands of the parents, who are most capable of making critical education decisions for their children,” Dockendorff said.

Senate Bill 1363 almost didn’t pass. State Sen. Barbara McGuire (D-Copper Basin) resurrected the bill on the last day of session after it had previously failed by one vote on the Senate floor.

“My vote for SB 1363 also gives Democrats a seat at the school choice table,” McGuire said. “Like it or not, school choice is already here in Arizona and school choice is gaining serious momentum across the country.”

Newly Eligible

Kindergartners slated to attend a public school rated D or F are now eligible for the school choice program, and funding has increased from 90 percent of a district’s state money to 90 percent of state per-pupil charter school funding. That means each child can receive approximately $6,000 per year. Special-needs children can receive more, depending on their disability.

Previous funds of $3,000 per year weren’t enough to give parents of non-special-needs children that many education options, said bill sponsor state Sen. Rick Murphy (R-Peoria). Each year, Arizona taxpayers pay an average of $8,000 for each student attending traditional public schools.

“Currently, for every 1,000 traditional students that use an ESA, the state saves $3.7 million,” McGuire said. “It will be less savings [under] SB 1363 [because the bill increases the ESA amount], but still a savings to the state. So scare tactics predicting the collapse of the Arizona public schools because of this program are unfair and misleading to parents.”

The bill also gradually lifts the annual enrollment cap. Military dependents, foster children, special-needs children, and children zoned into a public school rated D or F can receive an Arizona ESA. A fifth of Arizona’s schoolchildren, or approximately 200,000, are eligible.

“The program is designed specifically to aid the state’s most vulnerable kids,” McGuire said. “When kids start life with tough breaks like these, shouldn’t we help those children succeed in their education? The answer is yes.”

Accountability Debate

Although some national school choice groups pushed to require a nationally norm-referenced test for participating students, and a small faction of Republican legislators wanted to see similar provisions enacted, Murphy says that’s not necessary.

“I agreed to include the so-called accountability provisions with the exception of a testing requirement. I don’t think a testing requirement is necessary because parents are the accountability. You either trust them to make good choices for their child or you don’t,” Murphy said. “The majority of private schools already provide a nationally norm-referenced test. In the rare schools that don’t, it’s probably because the parents don’t see it as valuable and haven’t demanded it, and it shouldn’t be forced on them.”

Transparency built into education law, or any public law, is crucial for long-term success and public freedom, said Jonathan Butcher, education director for the Phoenix-based Goldwater Institute, a free-market think tank.

“You are giving parents and taxpayers money to use on their child’s education, and if you do that and do not ask that there be some demonstration of how those students are performing, you’re just giving money away,” Butcher said. “So we should look at public policy in this respect as we would look at a private contractor the government would hire—ensure that people are good stewards of public money.”

Small Program, Big Effect

School choice opponents argued the bill would financially damage public schools. McGuire didn’t buy that argument.

“Last year 302 children used Empowerment Scholarship Accounts statewide, and that number may double or even triple this coming school year,” McGuire said. “Even so, that is still such a small number of ESA recipients, it has no chance of impacting public schools in the least. What it does affect is the lives of those 1,000 or so children who will be finally receiving an education that best fits their needs.”

Brewer will continue to support school choice legislation that “keeps the power with parents, not bureaucrats” like SB 1363, Dockendorff said.

“I’m grateful that Gov. Brewer signed the bill,” Murphy said. “Many more families will have another meaningful education option for their children. Arizona has maintained its place as the leading state for school choice in America.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
Poorest Neighborhood in Columbus, Ohio Gets a Charter School

By Jay Lehr

Franklinton Preparatory Academy is a new public charter high school that opened this August in the poorest, most underserved neighborhood of Columbus, Ohio.

The demographics in Franklinton are stark, said Martin Griffiths, founder and CEO of the school: “The Federal Community Disadvantage Index rates two of the three Franklinton ZIP codes perfect 10s—the most disadvantaged score possible—while the third scores a 9.”

Just 25 percent of adults in the area have high school diplomas, and up to 40 percent of its young people abuse drugs and alcohol. More than half live below the poverty level.

In 1982, the area’s high school closed, requiring students to bus elsewhere. Losing a neighborhood school “is a wound that is slow to heal,” Griffiths said.

Franklinton Preparatory Academy (FPA) is a made-from-scratch, community-based high school that aims to provide an excellent public education option.

“We remain dedicated to the proposition that ‘If not us, then whom? And if not now, then when?’” said Michael Reidelbach, a retired businessman and FPA founder who has dedicated the past two years to the school. “FPA has joined hands with citizens, community groups, businesses, organizations, and foundations who share their mission and passion.”

Seeking High Achievement

On average, Franklinton students perform at two or more grade levels below their Columbus peers, drop out of high school at a higher rate, and create or endure higher crime rates.

Franklinton Prep will offer its students a small school community of 300 students, and its student to teacher ratio will be 15 to 1 so teachers and staff can provide individualized and small group instruction.

To stem the tide of kids dropping out, FPA’s first step is to give kids a reason to come to school every day. Relationships between teachers and students will be key and considerable resources will support teacher and staff training in this area. The school’s premise is “everyone graduates.”

“After researching best practices, [Franklinton Prep] selected the best instructional model to ensure that every Franklinton Prep student graduates with a life plan for success.”

DOUG BROOKS
PROFESSOR
MIAMI UNIVERSITY

Supplemental Online Instruction

“After researching best practices in curriculum, instruction, assessment, teacher training, and school leadership at A-rated schools serving similar student populations, they selected the best instructional model to ensure that every Franklinton Prep student graduates with a life plan for success,” said Doug Brooks, a professor of education at Miami University.

He continued, “Blended learning is the model. Blended learning combines the best of online schooling with the relationships and positive school environment that can only take place in a traditional brick and mortar school. … Moreover, because students will be learning at their own pace, our gifted and talented students will be able to take honors and AP classes, earning college credit.”

From the beginning of ninth grade, students’ programs will be tailored to their aspirations and personal strengths. The students will help direct their programs, with teachers designing small group and individual lessons accordingly. The objective is to replace the feeling that education is something that is done to kids instead of something children actively participate in.

Four Paths

Not every student needs, wants, or can afford to attend college, and FPA is working with many employers who need hard-working employees. The Franklinton Prep student prepares for one of four paths: career, for a living-wage job with benefits; four-year university; trade school, community college, or apprenticeship/certification programs; or enlistment into the U.S. military.

Beginning in 11th grade, FPA will provide job experience through internships. In ninth grade, academic advisors, who follow a small cohort of students throughout high school, ask each student three questions: “What do you like? What are you good at? And what do you want to be?”

The answers to those three simple questions will help reveal post-graduation objectives for each student.

FPA students can get free college credits through blended learning, Griffith said, “which will save money before they start borrowing and building college debt.”

The school also partners with Junior Achievement and local financial institutions to provide its students with financial literacy.

In addition, “FPA believes that art, music, and movement—physical education, martial arts, dance, et cetera—are core elements of an FPA education,” said Joe DeLoss, an FPA board member. “Often, these types of classes are the last remaining limbs still in the grasp of students who are in danger of dropping out. FPA has adopted a longer school day and a longer school year in part to be able to provide a robust art, music, and movement menu of classes.”

Finding a Home

Ohio charter schools struggle with facility expenses because the state does not provide them facility funding. Consequently, charter schools face a devil’s bargain: sacrifice teacher quality or facility soundness. FPA’s facility needs have been eased by its relationship with its landlord, Central Ohio Youth for Christ, a nonprofit organization that provides after-school tutoring. Its location is near the major museums, learning centers, universities, and corporate centers in Central Ohio.

Drive around Franklinton and imagine the same neighborhood five years from now, when FPA will celebrate its second graduating class. Or ten years from now, when their graduates have married, had kids (they prefer it to be in that order), and bought a home nearby.

FPA is poised to make a dramatic impact not only on the lives of students but also on a neighborhood that’s on the edge—by which they mean the edge of greatness.

Jay Lehr, Ph.D. (jlehr@heartland.org), science director for The Heartland Institute, lives near Columbus, Ohio.
What Families Do with School Choice

“[T]housands [of parents] across the country … are shepherding their children through a rapidly expanding field of K-12 education options that allow parents to fit education to each child’s changing needs.”

By Jenni White

Madison, Wisconsin mother Mary Keaveny has enrolled her five children in three different kinds of schools.

The children, ages two to 16, all began learning at home, even the two with dyslexia. Clint, schooled at home until eighth grade, just finished his freshman year at a nearby Catholic school that offers a classical education.

“Clint is a really smart kid, way beyond my ability to school at this point,” Mary said. “He needs to debate and argue, and it’s hard to do that at home.”

Mary knew Clint was in the right place when “we got the greatest letter from one of his teachers, who said he wrote the most beautiful essay for his final.”

Mary is one of thousands across the country who are shepherding their children through a rapidly expanding field of K-12 education options that allow parents to fit education to each child’s changing needs.

Sports and Dyslexia

Thirteen-year-old Ryan Keaveny loves sports. Though always active in various leagues, befriending kids his age was a challenge because Ryan was homeschooled until 2012.

“Playmates would get scarce in the fall as they all went back to their public school sports teams,” Mary said. When the Keavenys moved in 2012, they found a small Catholic school right around the corner.

“Ryan has only 11 [total students] in his class,” Mary reports, “which is great because he now has friends and a teacher who can give him really individualized instruction to help with his dyslexia.”

Dyslexia and Online Learning

Mary has homeschooled Kevin, 10, and Megan, 8, who struggles with severe dyslexia and could barely read.

The family’s recent move, combined with new expenses, Megan’s dyslexia, and the ever-present needs of a two-year-old found Mary needing some accountability for Kevin and Megan.

She found the Hayward Center for Individualized Learning (HACIL) Virtual Charter School, a nonprofit online school chartered through the Wisconsin Department of Education. Because Wisconsin practices public-school open-enrollment, Mary receives a transfer credit of $800 per child to attend HACIL. That can help pay for Internet service, books, and even enrichment classes.

Hayward is five hours from her home, but Mary has to make the trip only when she wants to check out books from HACIL’s library and to present the kids for state testing—a requirement of program enrollment.

“I can homeschool again this year because of the support provided by HACIL,” Mary said, happily.

Pervading Beliefs

Lindsey Hodson of Middletown, Virginia uses a mix of Montessori, Catholic, and home schools to satisfy the educational needs of her four small children.

“We don’t want our kids riding school a bus—we don’t like the lack of supervision. As Catholics, it’s hard to attend a school that doesn’t follow the liturgical calendar, and we like the fact that Catholic school classrooms all contain a crucifix and kids can pray and say the Pledge of Allegiance,” Lindsey said.

“Catholic schools also maintain an ongoing sibling discount, which encourages procreation. They are very open to life.”

Catholic education has not fitted every one of her kids, Lindsey says. Because dyslexia has challenged her husband, Lindsey wants to closely supervise her children’s reading instruction. As with her first child, who starts second grade in fall 2013, she plans to teach her children to read before their first grade.

The Hodsons’ five-year-old son spent a year in Montessori school and will attend one day a week this fall because he learns differently than their other three.

“I need to work on getting this kid to be more of a self-starter like the others,” Lindsey explained.

Crying at School

Lauren Marshall had never considered an alternative to public school until her son, Dillon, came home from school crying one day. Dillon has ADHD and reading difficulties.

“I never thought of myself as an advocate for my kids,” the Tulsa, Oklahoma, mother said. “I’d drop them off at school, go to work, and think they were fine.”

Laura took the next day off work to follow Dillon through third grade at his public elementary school. She was horrified to witness him climb under his desk and finally leave his classroom altogether.

Lauren is convinced: “If more parents understood the need to be involved, real changes in education could be made.”

Jenni White is cofounder of Restore Oklahoma Public Education and a former public school science teacher.

PODCAST INFO

Washington State Considers School Choice

By Kathlyn Shirley

A tax-credit scholarship bill introduced by Washington state lawmakers aims to “allow maximum freedom to parents to provide for the educational needs of children” by allowing businesses to receive tax credits for donating to K-12 scholarship programs.

“We are ridiculously backward in this state when it comes to education policy,” said Jami Lund, an education fellow at the Freedom Foundation, a think tank in Olympia. “Folks here are unaccustomed to talking about school choice.”

In 2012, Washington citizens approved a ballot measure allowing the state’s first charter schools, although none will likely open until 2014. Washington currently ranks 39th on the Center for Education Reform’s Parent Power Index, which measures parents’ access to and information about quality education opportunities.

If House Bill 2063 passes, Washington will be the 30th state with a tax-credit scholarship program. Eligible students would come from households earning up to 225 percent of the federal poverty level, or $53,000 for a family of four. After receiving a scholarship, students remain eligible provided their family income rises to no more than 275 percent of the poverty level.

Poor Kids Priced Out

The bill’s sponsor, state Rep. Liz Pike (R-Camas), says she looked at successful education tax credits around the country, such as Florida’s. This allowed her to pull from best practices, such as ensuring scholarship funds not only offset tuition costs but can also cover “education-related transportation fees and other instruction-related expenses” such as textbooks, tutoring, and online learning, which is popular in Washington.

The bill also provides for targeted assistance to special-needs students.

About one in 15 Washington students are enrolled in private education, according to the Freedom Foundation, but low-income and even middle-income families are denied access because they can’t afford tuition on top of taxes, though many private schools are not fully enrolled, Lund noted.

“Unless you are a privileged child, ... you have no hope of attending a private school in this state,” Pike said. “[This program] is about giving our lowest-income kids a chance to have a top education.”

Saves Millions

All credible studies of the fiscal impacts of such programs have shown they achieve substantial savings, says Jason Bedrick, a Cato Institute policy analyst.

Florida’s program saves $1.44 for every $1 of lost revenue, he says. The Freedom Foundation studied Pike’s proposal and concluded it too would save money.

“Each student transferring [to a private school] saves the state’s usual expenditure of $6,300,” Lund explained, and with the basic scholarship capped at $5,000, “savings of $20 million to $60 million are possible in the 2013–2015 budget.”

The bill caps total tax deductions at $100 million, a figure that automatically increases by 40 percent when students use 90 percent of the previous year’s cap.

Pike introduced the bill in a special session, so progress most likely won’t happen until January 2014, she said.

“Without this, our lowest-income kids will never have a chance at a private education,” she said.

Kathlyn Shirley (kathlyn.shirley@gmail.com) writes from Washington, DC.

Rein in EPA

EPA Is a Rogue Agency

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is the nation’s leading job killer, implementing and enforcing laws that impose impossible regulatory burdens on American businesses. EPA has perverted the Clean Air Act by declaring carbon dioxide a “pollutant,” despite the plain intent of the law’s authors to exclude such naturally occurring gases, and despite major flaws in the science used to claim carbon dioxide endangers human health.

The Solution

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

The Petition

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

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

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.
Teachers in Kansas Opt Out of Big Unions

By Ashley Bateman

Teachers in Deerfield, Kansas this fall are no longer members of the Kansas National Education Association or the National Education Association, the nation’s largest teachers union. They voted to decertify in June and have instead joined a local-only teacher association.

In 2012–2013, KNEA and NEA annual dues were nearly $600, said Joel McClure, a lead negotiator for the Deerfield teachers.

“The more information teachers have about alternatives, truly professional alternatives, they don’t want to give their money to KNEA or NEA,” McClure said.

Only five teachers of the 27 in Deerfield had been speaking for all the others as the only certified union members.

“Frankly, we didn’t feel like the union was offering anything that we couldn’t provide for ourselves,” said Garry Sigle, executive director of the nonunion Kansas Association of American Educators, which helped the Deerfield teachers decertify.

Deerfield is one of three Kansas districts that have decertified from the KNEA and NEA. Across the country, approximately 15 districts have separated from the NEA, according to the Association of American Educators (AAE).

“Only states without exclusivity in collective bargaining can effectively support alternative means of teacher representation,” said Mike Antonucci, publisher of the Education Intelligence Agency Web site. “The practical and statutory hurdles are high. Deerfield and similar locals also benefit from being too small for the state and national unions to commit large amounts of money and resources to squash decertification.”

Deerfield educators, administrators, and education board members have a good relationship, McClure said: “With KNEA out of the way, the relationship should improve.”

The change will benefit students by putting those in charge closer to their classrooms, Antonucci said.

“These [districts] are highlighting to other teachers out there throughout the state of Kansas there is another option,” Sigle said. “Teachers are now finding out that they don’t have to tolerate 15 to 20 percent of their teachers having total control.”

Local unions are “the power base of the entire union movement,” said Terry Moe, a Stanford University professor who studies unions. Teachers feel more tied to people they know rather than state union leaders with whom they often disagree politically.

“This is just a drop in the bucket for people who’d like to move away from NEA and AFT control,” Moe said. “We can’t engage in wishful thinking that this is a movement.”

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

Feds Target Wisconsin Vouchers

By Kathlyn Shirley

Wisconsin will tighten regulations on voucher schools after State Superintendent Tony Evers received a letter from the U.S. Department of Justice stating the program “must do more to enforce the federal statutory and regulatory requirements that govern the treatment of students with disabilities.”

The letter responded to a complaint the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed in June 2011 alleging the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) discriminates against disabled children.

The ACLU claimed Wisconsin has “repeatedly made it easier for non-disabled children to receive vouchers.” Students with disabilities in Milwaukee public schools, they claimed, are deterred from vouchers, denied admission into participating schools, and expelled or “constructively forced to leave” voucher schools.

There is no evidence those charges are true, says Patrick Wolf, a University of Arkansas professor. It is already against federal law for any private school to discriminate against disabled students, and a statistical analysis by Wolf’s team shows no measure of student disadvantage, including disability, had any effect on whether students were admitted to Wisconsin voucher schools.

“The general problem and disturbing characteristic of the [Justice Department] letter [is] misapplication of the law,” Wolf said. By switching oversight of voucher schools from parents to the state Department of Public Instruction (DPI), Wisconsin will be “unconstitutionally entangled in the operation of private schools,” he said.

No Parent Complaints

In December 2012, Department of Justice (DOJ) officials met with Wisconsin officials to investigate the ACLU’s claims and discuss voucher schools’ legal obligations.

Wisconsin law requires “the private school determines which pupils to accept on a random basis” and during the meeting, DPI assured its commitment to “administering the school choice program in accordance with all applicable state and federal requirements,” the DOJ letter says.

In a response letter, Evers also noted that in the past 22 years serving more than 25,000 students, Wisconsin’s DPI “has not received any such complaints related to the participation of children with disabilities in the MPCP.”

The DOJ letter, dated April 2013, outlined results of the December meeting, concluding, “because the school choice program is a public program funded and administered by the State ... the [voucher] program is subject to the requirements of [the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)].” It then calls for expanded monitoring and supervision of participating schools.

Such requirements include establishing a formal complaint procedure, additional data collecting and reporting, outreach about the program to students with disabilities, ADA training, and heightened monitoring of voucher schools’ admission practices.

These provisions, the DOJ states, “require DPI to amend the policies and practices that govern its oversight of Wisconsin’s school choice program for the 2012–2014 school year.”

Courts Assign Parental Oversight

The Wisconsin State Supreme Court twice has determined that students who participate in the MPCP program are “parentally placed” instead of “governmentally placed,” effectively affording all oversight and accountability of the school system to parents and students.
The 2002 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in Zelman v. Simmons-Harris also concluded such parental placements, regardless of support through government vouchers, do not violate the First Amendment or require such schools to follow the federal education disability laws.

“The biggest legal question may be whether the DOJ letter violates the Supreme Court decision, Zelman,” said disability lawyer Allison Hertog, who sits on the board of Florida’s McKay Scholarship, the nation’s first vouchers for disabled students. The court cases make it clear that a private school using voucher funds is still a private school, and that parents are responsible for monitoring the quality and performance of that private school, she said.

What’s Next?
Wisconsin lawmakers have proposed special-needs vouchers for the past few years. Wolf says that is a better solution than complying with the DOJ’s mandates.

“If people are concerned that special-needs students are under-represented in the voucher program,... an obvious remedy would be a voucher specifically for special-needs kids,” he said. That would allow the state to provide more appropriate resources, funding, and unique accommodations.

Wisconsin’s attorney general will likely need to consult with the state DPI, legal experts in school choice law, and the ADA to determine whether the Justice Department’s demands are in accordance with federal law or the attorney general should challenge the demands in court, Hertog said.

Kathlyn Shirley (kathlyn.shirley@gmail.com) writes from Washington, DC.

By Mary Petrides Tillotson
Although Democrats and Republicans largely agree No Child Left Behind, the largest federal education law, is a shambles, House Republicans and Senate Democrats have different ideas about how to revise it.

“It’s a matter of the conservative philosophy of localities and states being closest to the child and being empowered to best direct education dollars and decision-making, versus a big-government philosophy that says this decision should increasingly be made by bureaucrats in Washington, [and] another federal program and another billion dollars will finally do the trick,” said Lindsey Burke, an education fellow at the Washington, DC-based Heritage Foundation.

The Student Success Act (SSA), introduced by Rep. John Kline (R-MN) and Todd Rokita (R-IN), chairmen of House education committees, aims to “restore local control, support more effective teachers, reduce the federal footprint, and empower parents,” says a committee press release.

The bill passed the House in July. President Barack Obama has threatened a veto.

In the Senate, Democrats' Strengthening America's Schools Act (SASA) has been marked up and awaits a vote.

No Child Left Behind, which passed in 2001 and has been overdue for an update since 2007, is the most expensive and far-reaching federal education law in history. It required states to test students in reading and math each year and have all students scoring “proficient” by 2014. The Obama administration has given 37 states a pass on meeting NCLB mandates in exchange for adopting administration-favored policies.

House Republicans
At about 550 pages long, SSA responds to specific federal encroachments—Common Core and Race to the Top—said Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom. It eliminates some of the worst of NCLB, but not all of it.

“There is some mention about ‘We think NCLB was too prescriptive’ and ‘States should do their own standards and accountability,’” he said, “but it continues to suggest that the federal government has some responsibility to make sure the states are monitoring outcomes.”

Burke said the bill is only a short step in the right direction.

“They are to some extent trying to eliminate the most onerous provisions of NCLB, but I think there is a long way to go from there to eliminating federal intervention,” she said.

“The federal government has shown no ability to positively affect academic achievement, and there’s nothing in this bill that would change that,” McCluskey said.

The bill eliminates NCLB’s proficiency mandate and another that requires high teacher credentials. It also restricts the U.S. Secretary of Education’s influence over state standards and tests. McCluskey said he was “pleasantly surprised with the strength of the wording” of that provision.

Conservatives shouldn’t try to fix NCLB, Burke said.

“It’s a bureaucratic, heavy-handed, 600-page federal law. Fixing it doesn’t limit federal intervention in education,” she said. “The goal of conservative policymakers should be to allow states to opt out.”

Senate Democrats
Burke called SASA “a 1,150-page blueprint for big-government education.” It requires districts to pay teachers the same in poor schools as richer counterparts, would keep the federal government heavily involved in efforts to alter a state’s lowest-performing schools, and require states to tie teacher pay to student test scores. The Republican bill does none of these.

“They’re viewing Washington as the appropriate change agent in education, when really it has to be the local school districts and parents,” Burke said.

The bill includes an anti-bullying measure and instructions for handling student pregnancy.

“That’s the philosophy: We’re the federal government, we know best, and we’re in charge,” McCluskey said.

Getting Something Passed
Passing a sensible bill is difficult, McCluskey said, because throwing federal tax money at pet programs signals to voters that congressmen care.

A bill that required some testing in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school, without being any more prescriptive, could get Democrat support, he said.

“The question is, how willing would Democrats be to not have all sorts of other [provisions]?” he asked. “I think you could get broad agreements on how prescriptive federal policy is, but I don’t know if that broad agreement would be enough.”

Mary Petrides Tillotson, a former Michigan reporter, writes from Front Royal, Virginia.
Students Benefit from Alternative Teacher Certification—or None

By Robert Maranto

In “What’s the Alternative to a Well-Prepared Teacher?”—just published by the National Education Policy Center—my friends and colleagues Chris Goering and Bill McComas criticize the Arkansas Teacher Corps.

ATC is a new alternative certification program recruiting and training new teachers and placing them in low-income and rural school districts facing teacher shortages. It is the brainchild of another University of Arkansas colleague, Gary Ritter.

ATC’s first cohort starts teaching this fall after six weeks of intensive training by experienced K-12 educators. Since 135 would-be teachers applied for 20-odd slots, ATC has considerable talent, many of whom would not normally seek teaching as a profession, such as college instructors, two recent Ph.D.s, midcareer professionals, and others with top-notch grades in rigorous majors—people who could choose more lucrative careers. All will teach at schools that have trouble getting anyone, much less the best, to teach.

Even Chris and Bill admit alternative certification programs like ATC recruit the most talented into the teaching profession and that research on the largest such program, Teach for America, “has taught us that these smart individuals may make a difference in student achievement.”

Just Like Nuke Testing?

Yet Chris and Bill oppose ATC—not because ATC might someday compete with their own, more traditional teacher training programs (which used to hold a monopoly), but because they believe ATC members will not remain in the classroom.

Chris and Bill also fear the program “experiments” on the most vulnerable kids: “Historically, these types of experiments have not ended well (e.g., Nuclear testing in the Pacific after WWII) and are perpetrated against racially and economically disadvantaged people—those without a voice to speak up against the wrong.”

So Gary Ritter is no different from a general nuking South Sea Islands?

“[T]here is no statistical evidence [alternatively certified] teachers leave teaching any sooner than traditionally trained ones. Altcert programs target high-poverty schools, where all teachers, whatever their training, often leave for greener pastures.”

Doing No Harm

Again I’m sure Bill and Chris are not defending their own program turf, but seek only what is best for children. Fortunately, research shows their concerns are unwarranted. As Mike McShane and I point out in President Obama and Education Reform, in recent years roughly a third of new teachers have come through alternative teacher certification. Such programs are no longer experimental: They have been around for decades and are backed by President Obama.

There is precious little evidence that these programs hurt kids. In the best research review of such “altcert” programs, Pam Grossman and Susanna Loeb’s Alternative Routes to Teaching, published by Harvard Education Press, the authors find when controlling for the type of school, there is no statistical evidence altcert teachers leave teaching any sooner than traditionally trained ones. Altcert programs target high-poverty schools, where all teachers, whatever their training, often leave for greener pastures.

Moreover, altcert programs exist because schools of education refuse to place teachers in certain schools. I know this from firsthand experience, having spent some time urging education schools to send teachers to majority-black schools. ATC serves communities others have rejected. I would never suggest that redlining certain schools is racist, but others might.

Elites Ignore Certification

Chris and Bill think traditional teacher training trumps altcert. Although Chris and Bill do a great job training future teachers, unfortunately, research by Art Levine and others suggests what they do is not the norm. Most traditional programs underperform at recruiting and educating teachers. For that reason even elites like President Obama do not trust traditional certification programs.

Because of that distrust, we have decades of experiments on the impacts of uncertified teachers (NOcert) on students. The subjects of these experiments were not our most vulnerable children as Chris and Bill fear, but the children of the most powerful. It’s as if the experimenters nuked Wall Street.

As McShane and I point out (p. 61), young “Barry” Obama studied under uncertified teachers at Hawai’i’s famed Pinahou School. Pinahou does not even consider certification when hiring new teachers—“I called their personnel office and asked.”

In Chicago, the Obamas rejected public schools, which are staffed by certified teachers, to send their daughters to the much-storied University of Chicago Laboratory (“Lab”) School founded by John Dewey. When asked whether she hires certified teachers, the Lab School’s personnel director replied, “We do not look at that; it doesn’t make any difference.”

Secretary of State John Kerry attended St. Paul’s in New Hampshire. St. Paul’s personnel director said, “We do not consider teacher certification in hiring. ... I would estimate that out of our 110 faculty only two or three are certified.”

It’s the same at Sidwell Friends, the alma mater of Al Gore and Chelsea Clinton, now attended by the Obama girls; at Episcopal High School, whose alumni include John McCain; and at Philips Academy (aka Andover), attended by both presidents Bush.

Benefits of Competition

In short, most of the recent major party presidential nominees studied under uncertified teachers and seemingly learned enough to succeed. In fairness, former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin did study under traditionally certified public school teachers.

I hope competition from altcert ultimately forces traditional teacher training programs to improve and to stop redlining majority-black schools where teachers are in short supply. Until then, Arkansas needs ATC.

Robert Maranto is the 21st Century Chair in Leadership at the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas and has done fieldwork in more than 150 schools.

LEARN MORE

President Obama and Education Reform, Robert Maranto and Michael McShane, 2012: http://www.amazon.com/dp/1137030925
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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.

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The Parent Trigger: Justification and Design Guidelines
By Joseph L. Bast and Joy Pullmann
October 2012, 49pp., $7.95

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