Judge Lets 2,400 North Carolina Kids Attend Choice Schools

By Mary C. Tillotson

More than 2,000 low-income North Carolina parents will be able to send their children to the schools of their choice after all, thanks to a ruling of the state supreme court.

"Today's historic decision vindicates the over 4,500 parents who applied for their child to receive an Opportunity Scholarship and puts parents back in the driver's seat of their child's education," Darrell Allison, president of Parents for Educational Freedom in North Carolina (PEFNC), said in a statement.

The program allows 2,400 students from low-income families to receive public scholarships, or vouchers, to attend private schools. In the first 25 days of applications, more than 5,500 students had applied, according to PEFNC.

When the scholarship law was passed in 2013, two lawsuits were filed to stop the program and keep students in public schools, even if those schools were not a good fit.

Law Expands Choice in Florida

By Mary C. Tillotson

Gov. Rick Scott (R) signed an expansion of Florida’s tax-credit scholarship program, providing partial scholarships to private schools for families that earn too much money to be eligible for a full scholarship.

State teachers unions quickly filed suit against the law, which also creates an education savings account program for special-needs students. Tighter restrictions on scholar-
CALL FOR PROPOSALS

The 4th International Conference on School Choice & Reform (ICSCR) will bring together researchers, policy specialists, practitioners, and organization leaders from around the world who are interested in school choice opportunities and policies that recognize the central roles of parents and teachers. Understanding that school choice functions best within a policy framework that seeks to guarantee equity and effective education, while safeguarding school autonomy, the conference welcomes presentations that are critical as well as supportive of school choice. Please visit the event website to register and/or to submit your proposal for a presentation.

The ICSCR is sponsored by the Journal of School Choice and hosted by the National Institute for Educational Options at Nova Southeastern University and is in cooperation with the European Association for Education Law and Policy. ICSCR brings together individuals with varied experience and responsibilities who are concerned with educational freedom in its various forms: (1) the freedom of families to choose schools that they think are best for their children, (2) the freedom of educators to create and maintain distinctive schools, and also (3) the sensitive role of government in promoting such freedoms while ensuring that every child receives an adequate education.

Deliberately designed for around 120 participants to encourage discussion, ICSCR seeks to stimulate new thinking and foster international collaboration. By drawing representatives of governments into that discussion, ICSCR encourages development and implementation of effective and equitable policies.

If you are not on our email list, let us know to add you to receive information at nieo@nova.edu.

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

Co-Chairs: Charles L. Glenn (Boston University) and Priscilla Wohlstetter (Teachers College, Columbia)

Event website: regonline.com/icscr15 Read research papers, view photos and listen to a plenary session podcast on Common Core Standards presented at the last event: or fischlerschool.nova.edu/nieo
Outreach Campaign Helps Double School Choice Enrollment in Arizona

By Loren Heal

Thanks to program changes and an aggressive outreach campaign, families of 2,479 students have applied for Arizona’s Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESAs) for the 2014–15 school year, compared to 1,100 in 2013–14.

The scholarship accounts send 90 percent of state K–12 spending into savings accounts controlled by parents and can be used for a wide variety of specified uses, including tuition, therapy, online classes, and more.

Several factors have increased enrollment. “A concerted effort to let parents know—to simply inform them—that the program is available to them was enough to get more people to apply,” said Jonathan Butcher, education policy director at the Phoenix-based Goldwater Institute.

“This is not a conversation yet,” said Kim Martinez, spokeswoman for the Arizona Alliance for School Choice. “Many parents have never heard of School Choice.”

“Two keys to our success,” said Kim Martinez, spokeswoman for the Arizona Alliance for School Choice, “were strong allies and relying on more than one means of communication.”

Working with Goldwater and the Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options (HCREO), “We reached parents through traditional marketing techniques such as mail, calls, and neighborhood canvassing, as well as through conventional advertising on television and radio,” Martinez said. “We also diversified our message, recognizing that many parents might speak Spanish, and we created a custom YouTube tutorial to help parents navigate through the Arizona Department of Education website.

“While many children benefit from public school, far too many children fall between the cracks, do not succeed in the traditional school environment, and are in need of another option,” Martinez said.

‘I Knew What He Needed’

When her son was almost 11 months old, Arizona mother Holland Hines realized “he probably had autism,” she said. From then until age 7, he received special services through the public school system.

“Although there were some wonderful teachers and therapists that did their best to provide what they could for him within the constraints they were given, it was never enough, and each year he was falling further and further behind,” Hines said. “I knew what he needed. I knew what would work for him, but I couldn’t force a teacher who had a dozen or more kids in her class and an immovable administration above her to bend the teaching style and curriculum to my son’s needs, no matter how urgent those needs were.”

Hines moved to Arizona to get her son into the ESA program, “the best school choice [program] in the country,” she said.

“I am able to hire staff specifically to work with him and how he learns best,” she said. “If someone isn’t a good fit, I can leave it and move on to what works best. We are no longer bound by the opinion of a stranger who has never met my son on how to best educate him and prepare him for a life of success, happiness, and independence.”

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Wisconsin Imposes New Rules on Voucher Schools

By Macaela Bennett

Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker (R) signed a bill requiring voucher schools to provide more data to state and federal governments, saying the measure will increase transparency for government officials and parents.

School Choice Wisconsin President Jim Bender explained Senate Bill 286 primarily does two things. First, it sets a timeline by which voucher schools must link up with a new statewide student data network that collects personal information about students and teachers. Second, it requires that all students in the system receive a unique student ID number.

“This is important, especially in Milwaukee, where we have students moving back and forth [between schools],” Bender said. “Without it, information doesn’t transfer at all or is very slow in transferring.”

Privacy Concerns Dismissed

Although Bender acknowledged parents’ concerns about amassing personal information in potentially vulnerable government databases, he said the system will provide more accurate public information about all schools that receive tax dollars.

“[Private] schools here are very skeptical [of the new law],” Bender said. “They will have to see the absolute specifics of the program before rendering their support.”

Although the new law did not include extra data privacy protections, Christian D’Andrea, a policy analyst for the MacIver Institute, says it won’t pose privacy problems.

“Any data can and will be taken out of context, but this will limit the ways voucher schools are incorrectly compared to public schools,” D’Andrea said.

Part of a Package

Scott Jensen, an advisor to the American Federation for Children, said the legislation is the first of several that legislative leaders hope to pass in the next couple of years regarding voucher schools.

Jensen says the next steps will likely include developing a report card for every school, awards for high-performing schools, and reporting school safety and parent satisfaction.

“This is sort of like the way investments and stocks work, in that everyone who sells stock is required to report financial information in a standardized format so investors can decide whether it’s the right investment or not,” Jensen said. “Right now, we’re not giving enough information for parents to make a smart choice.”

Despite concerns about burdening voucher schools with more regulations, D’Andrea says the legislation should improve Wisconsin’s voucher program.

“Some schools don’t deserve to be in the voucher program and are parasites. Hopefully, this will force them out and create more space for high-performing schools. This is a step in the right direction, but a lot more work needs to be done.”

MacIver Institute

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CHRISTIAN D’ANDREA
POLICY ANALYST
MACIVER INSTITUTE

Judge Lets 2,400 North Carolina Children Attend Choice Schools

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The North Carolina Association of Educators, which filed one lawsuit in conjunction with the North Carolina Justice Center and 25 taxpayers, argued public money funding scholarships is earmarked by the state’s constitution to fund public education.

Those representing pro-school-choice parents in the lawsuits agreed the state’s constitution sets aside money for public education, but argued the scholarships are funded through a separate area of the state budget.

Lawsuits often take weeks or months, so in February, the Wake County Superior Court issued a preliminary decision stopping the program until it gets sorted out in court. Parents who were denied the chance to put their children in schools of choice then took their case to the court of public opinion, issuing YouTube videos and Twitter posts decrying the opportunity their children had lost for attending a school the family wanted.

The Institute for Justice (IJ) appealed the injunction to the appeals court, then to the state supreme court. The state supreme court is allowing the program to continue until courts reach a final decision over whether the state’s constitution permits voucher programs.

Appeals Court to Hear Case

“The [trial] judge put his foot on the brakes, and the supreme court took his foot off the brake,” said Richard Komer, senior attorney for IJ and lead attorney on the case.

The state appeals court will hear arguments and may refer the case back to trial court for arguments over whether the program is constitutional, said Renee Flaherty, an IJ attorney also working on the case.

Parents previously denied the private school vouchers will have that option this fall. The state plans to begin distributing voucher funds on August 15.

“It’s a substantial victory for school choice. Not necessarily a final victory, but it at least means the implementation of the program can proceed again,” Komer said.

Mary Petrides Tillotson is an education reporter for Watchdog.org, from which this article was reprinted with permission.
Mo. Governor Signs Bill to Replace Common Core

By Hailey Vrdolyak

Gov. Jay Nixon (D) has signed a bill that would replace national Common Core education mandates with Missouri’s own set of educational criteria.

House Bill 1490 would abolish Common Core standards by the 2016–17 school year and establish new state standards with a built-in process for revision. “HB 1490 can be simplified to three words: sovereignty, privacy, and flexibility,” said the chief sponsor of the bill, state Rep. Kurt Bahr (R-St. Charles).

Representative Government Restored

Education standards establish what curriculum and tests must contain. Common Core is a set of national standards and tests for English and math in grades K–12. One of the central critiques of Common Core is states largely put them in place without approval from voters or their representatives. Private organizations created the mandates, and President Barack Obama’s administration gave states extra money to adopt them.

“Missouri adopted [Common Core] without the General Assembly’s knowledge or authorization. One of our problems with Common Core was its secretive implementation,” Bahr said.

Bahr says HB 1490 is intended to correct that problem and restore sovereignty to the state and the people by creating a transparent process for developing and revising state standards.

“We will have two task forces. The first will be composed of Missouri educators from higher education and elementary and secondary education, and the second will be made up of various stakeholders in education, including parents. The taskforces will write Missouri standards in an open and transparent process that will ensure quality standards for our state, our schools, and our students,” Bahr said.

“We also included clear language that provides school districts to have complete autonomy on the selection of curriculum for their districts.”

Potential for Rebranding

Activists who oppose Common Core, mostly grassroots groups led by parents, learned politicians could turn a grassroots victory into a defeat when Indiana repealed Common Core and replaced it with requirements that too closely resembled the national standards. Oklahoma and South Carolina also recently repealed the national mandates.

“In many ways, the Missouri bill to ‘repeal’ Common Core is very similar to bills passed in Indiana and Oklahoma. It is not a full-scale repeal but could lead to a new set of standards,” said James Shuls, director of education policy at the Show-Me Institute.

“The state could end up staying with Common Core, or they could come up with something completely different,” said Shuls. “That will really depend upon the work of the committee.”

Anne Gassel, a co-founder of the Missouri Coalition Against Common Core, says HB 1490 has greater potential to produce higher-quality standards than Indiana’s Common Core rebrand.

“Unlike Indiana’s bill, ours requires that members of workgroups be residents of Missouri and [have] a minimum of 10 years teaching experience,” she said. “There are also positions on the workgroups specifically for parents.”

Shula says the bill could give the people of Missouri the ability to “opt out” of Common Core. “The most important piece of the bill is not the potential for repeal of Common Core, but the assurance that a new set of standards cannot be foisted upon Missourians without the knowledge of the public,” he said.

Data Privacy and Local Curricula

Additionally, the Missouri bill aims to protect student privacy. It is not clear what privacy protections there are for national Common Core tests, which Missouri will drop if Nixon signs the bill.

“We put in strict requirements to protect personally identifiable data and even put in penalty provisions with significant fines to put teeth behind those requirements,” Bahr said. “We also put in language to protect teacher evaluation data from unauthorized access.”

Bahr says the bill would create a process for revision so the standards may better serve specific state interests. “By creating a process for revising our state standards, we give our state the opportunity to change those standards as we see fit to ensure their quality and rigor remain high and developmentally appropriate,” Bahr stated.

Gassel says the bill creates the opportunity to restore power to Missouri citizens. “We consider the bill a good start toward returning educational direction and development to the state and local districts,” she said.

Hailey Vrdolyak is a government relations intern for The Heartland Institute.
So. Carolina Governor Signs Common Core Repeal

**By Joe Shaver**

South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley (R) signed into law a bill that creates a committee to review and replace national Common Core standards in the state before the 2015–16 school year.

Haley’s signature made South Carolina the second state to repeal and replace Common Core, after Indiana, which replaced Common Core with curriculum mandates some observers say are too similar to Common Core. South Carolina State Superintendent Mick Zais says he will work to replace Common Core with far better curriculum requirements.

Common Core specifies what K–12 math and English curriculum and tests must cover and was heavily promoted by President Barack Obama’s administration. Critics say it offers mediocre academics, while proponents say it’s better than what most states had previously.

The South Carolina bill sparked a debate earlier this spring when the state department of education decided to withdraw from national Common Core testing in anticipation of legislative action. The South Carolina Board of Education voted to reject that proposal, but Zais reinstated the department’s decision to drop the tests.

The new law should clear any confusion caused by conflicting orders. The bill prohibits South Carolina from using the federally funded national tests.

“A special assessment panel will be convened immediately upon passage of the bill to provide input for a new assessments system, and [it] must seek public input,” said state Sen. Wes Hayes (R-Rock Hill), chairman of the Senate Education Committee.

**Slow Transition Ahead**

The bill would not immediately stop Common Core.

The new law continues “implementation of Common Core standards in [English] and math in 2014–15, but also requires a cyclical review of these standards on or before January 1, 2015, for the purpose of adopting South Carolina college and career readiness standards for 2015–16,” said Hayes.

Hayes says he does not expect the new standards to simply rewrite Common Core. He cited increased public awareness of Common Core as a reason to be optimistic for genuine improvements upon national benchmarks.

“It is all going to be determined by the new superintendent, so it is critically important that we elect the right superintendent of education, otherwise we will end up just like Indiana, or Oklahoma, or Arizona, with just a repackaging,” said Sheri Few, a former candidate for state superintendent who founded South Carolina Parents Involved in Education.

“Nothing else matters if we don’t get rid of Common Core, because Common Core is destroying public education,” said Few.

Joe Shaver (joe.shaver@gmail.com) writes from Bel Air, Maryland.

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Florida Governor Rick Scott Signs School Choice Expansion, Lawsuit Follows

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ship-giving nonprofit organizations also were included in the new legislation.

“Overall it’s a good thing,” said Patrick Gibbons, public affairs manager for Step Up for Students, a nonprofit organization that administers scholarships. “What’s important here is the program will serve more children and provide those students with larger scholarships.”

Florida’s tax-credit scholarship is not a voucher program. Vouchers were ruled unconstitutional in Florida in 2006 except in programs designed for special-needs students. The tax-credit scholarship allows corporations to donate to nonprofit organizations that provide scholarships for low-income students to attend private schools. Corporations can then receive state tax credits for those donations. Scholarships are thus funded through incentivized private donations instead of tax dollars.

Education savings accounts (ESAs) function more like vouchers, but they let parents divvy up state education money among various programs, such as classes and therapy, whereas vouchers purchase only tuition from one school.

Scholarship-giving nonprofit organizations will administer the education savings accounts. By law, $358 million can be awarded in scholarships this year. If at least 90 percent of that amount is raised and all available scholarships are given out, the program can grow again next year. It has grown every year since this “escalator” system was created.

The union lawsuit alleges that including both the tax-credit expansion and ESAs in one bill violates a provision in the state constitution that limits how many topics a bill can cover.

Under current law, students enter the scholarship program if their families earn up to 185 percent of the federal poverty level. They can continue receiving scholarships as long as their family incomes are below 230 percent of the federal poverty level.

With the new bill, students will be eligible for new and renewed scholarships if their family’s income is up to 280 percent of the poverty level. Students from families earning 200 to 260 percent would receive a partial scholarship, ranging from 50 to 88 percent of the full scholarship amount. The federal poverty level is $23,850 for a family of four. These new guidelines would become effective for the 2016–17 school year.

The new bill would allow more children to move into the scholarship program if they have previously attended private schools. Current law allows foster children to participate, but the bill expands eligibility to children placed with grandparents, neighbors, or others who do not have state foster care licenses. Foster children who are adopted can keep their scholarships. Scholarship-granting nonprofit organizations will be subject to a second annual audit.

Mary Petrides Tillotson is an education reporter for Watchdog.org. This article first appeared at FloridaWatchdog.org and is reprinted with permission.
Unions to Appeal Calif. Court’s Tenure Turndown

By Mary C. Tillotson

The California Teachers Association (CTA) announced plans to appeal a June 10 court decision striking down teacher tenure statutes and concluding that teachers union rules send the worst teachers to the neediest students.

The lawsuit, Vergara v. California, argued California statutes make it difficult for administrators to dismiss poorly performing teachers, require layoffs based purely on seniority, and allow for permanent employment status after 18 months of teaching. The plaintiffs further claimed the statutes deny children their right to equal education. The court agreed.

Nine students, backed by the non-profit organization Students Matter, brought the suit against the state. California’s teachers unions intervened and were a party in the case. Judge Rolf M. Treu ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, finding all of the challenged statutes unconstitutional.

“This decision presents an opportunity for a progressive state with a tradition of innovation to build a new framework for the teaching profession that protects students’ rights to equal educational opportunities while providing teachers the support, respect, and rewarding careers they deserve,” said Arne Duncan, U.S. secretary of education, in a statement. “My hope is that today’s decision moves from the courtroom toward a collaborative process in California that is fair, thoughtful, practical, and swift. Every state, every school district needs to have that kind of conversation.”

National Implications

The ruling moves teaching in a more professional direction, says Alexandra Freeze, spokeswoman for the Association of American Educators (AAE), a nonunion professional organization for teachers.

“We believe teachers are professionals. Each teacher has individual strengths and weaknesses, which are better brought to the table. Strict tenure laws and this one-size-fits-all system doesn’t reflect a professional atmosphere where teachers are rewarded for performance and given an opportunity to negotiate their own contracts,” Freeze said. She said the ruling offers a way to “balance the needs of students with those of teachers.”

About 80 percent of AAE members responding to a survey said tenure is not necessary for effective teaching, and about 80 percent do not support “last in, first out” layoffs based only on seniority. The CTA argues the ruling will be hard on teachers.

“Today’s ruling would make it harder to attract and retain quality teachers in our classrooms and ignores all research that shows experience is a key factor in effective teaching,” according to a CTA news release. The CTA did not return calls for comment.

What Will the Legislature Do?

The biggest question going forward, said Joshua Dunn, columnist on law and education for Education Next and a professor at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, is California’s political response. The court overturned the statutes but did not advise the state on how to revise its education laws.

“It is not the function of this Court to dictate or even to advise the legislature as to how to replace the Challenged Statutes. All this Court may do is apply the constitutional principles of law to the Challenged Statutes as it has done here, and trust the legislature to fulfill its mandated duty to enact legislation on the issues herein discussed that passes constitutional muster, thus providing each child in this state with a basically equal opportunity to achieve a quality education,” Treu wrote in the ruling.

Dunn says the state’s education code isn’t workable if these statutes are simply crossed off, so it’s up to California’s lawmakers to make revisions. The court decision serves as a forceful, authoritative message to lawmakers to do that.

John Deasy, superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District, says he hopes lawmakers will act soon. “There’s no reason in my mind why our legislative and elected leaders shouldn’t be sitting down this afternoon to begin correcting the laws,” he said. “I see no barrier whatsoever for immediacy,” Deasy stated.

Courts Inappropriate for Making Law

Lance Izumi, senior director of education studies at the Pacific Research Institute, says the legislature is the appropriate place for these types of reforms. It’s unfortunate, he says, that students had to go to trial at all.

“If you have a situation like in California where the CTA is the largest spending lobby in Sacramento and dwarfs any of its contemporaries by a country mile, you end up having a situation where too many lawmakers are controlled by teachers unions, and therefore the odds of getting a reform package through that type of legislature are difficult. This court case was really a last resort for students,” Izumi said.

According to Dunn, repeated appeals could send the case to the state’s supreme court for a final decision, but that could take a couple of years. If revised laws are passed before then, higher courts could throw out the case as moot; the political process would have resolved the problem.

“That would mean no one would have to appeal, though you could imagine the teachers union disliking any reforms passed by the legislature,” Dunn said. “Maybe they would sue, saying the revised laws are a violation of their rights.”

Mary Petrides Tillotson is an education reporter for Watchdog.org. This article is reprinted with permission from CaliforniaWatchdog.org.
Obama Administration: More Federal Involvement Can Boost Teacher Quality

By Kate Patrick

In the wake of a California court decision that found union rules send the worst teachers to the neediest students, President Barack Obama’s administration has released a plan it says will solve that problem without demanding an end to teacher tenure.

In its “Excellent Teachers For All” initiative, embedded within waivers of the federal No Child Left Behind law, the Obama administration requires states to report regularly on their plans to get better teachers into low-income schools. The initiative is a noble aspiration but vague and devoid of important details, says Rick Hess, director of education policy at the American Enterprise Institute. “This is more the Obama administration making it up as it goes along,” Hess said. “It’s not at all clear how they are going to make this work. Are they going to require states to change pay systems to get teachers to go where they want them to go? Are they going to order states to move a sect of teachers from middle-class schools to poverty schools? Are they going to move states to hire better teachers?”

Don’t Mess with Texas

States don’t want the national government, particularly the Obama administration, telling them what to do. “States will say they are going to go along, but you don’t really want to cross the Department of Education, if you can avoid it,” Hess said. The initiative is intended to address a real need in low-income schools, says Sandi Jacobs, state policy director for the National Council on Teacher Quality, but she also acknowledges the vagueness of the initiative and state reluctance to comply. “Too often these federal initiatives require plans from states that don’t set the world on fire in terms of innovation,” Jacobs said. “It’s good news that the Department of Education is putting attention to this.”

Feds Fill Leadership Vacuum

States typically don’t send the most effective teachers to the worst schools, but because they haven’t done anything about this problem, the federal government has stepped in, says Andy Smarick, a partner at Bellwether Education Partners. “The federal government has the best of intentions, and they want to see a good result occur, but two things have to be said: They don’t have very much authority to carry out what they want, and because of that, they will run the risk of being viewed again as pushing their authority too far,” Smarick said. Even though states may feel uncomfortable being ordered to report to national government officials on teacher quality, they have little choice, because disobeying threatens federal funds, says Smarick. Nevertheless, he says it is unlikely states will “redistribute” effective teachers to needy schools.

Incentives Matter

Jacobs says states must provide good incentives for teachers to go to low-income schools if they are going to make any headway with the problem. Children in low-income schools aren’t getting effective teachers because, salary and job conditions being equal, teachers would rather live in high-income areas and teach in higher-income schools, Jacobs says. “Assigning is one thing, and retention is another,” Jacobs said. “So how do we incentivize our teachers to work in high-need schools? … It’s not just pay — we know good teachers want to work with other good teachers and with a good principal.”

SANDI JACOBS, STATE POLICY DIRECTOR, NATIONAL COUNCIL ON TEACHER QUALITY

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The Oklahoma Supreme Court rejected a lawsuit the state board of education filed against the state legislature in an attempt to circumvent a new law repealing and replacing national Common Core education mandates.

The board argued the legislature overstepped its authority because setting curriculum and testing criteria is the board’s responsibility, not the legislature’s. The court rejected that claim in July in an 8–1 vote after four hours of oral arguments, affirming the legislature’s constitutional authority to oversee curriculum.

Oklahoma Gov. Mary Fallin (R) had traveled the country promoting Common Core, but she moderated her tone and eventually signed the repeal as grassroots activists pushed Oklahoma’s legislature to spurn the curriculum and testing mandates by significant vote margins twice this spring.

Oklahoma Gov. Mary Fallin (R) had traveled the country promoting Common Core, but she moderated her tone and eventually signed the repeal as grassroots activists pushed Oklahoma’s legislature to spurn the curriculum and testing mandates by significant vote margins twice this spring.
Violating Federal Law

So far the state has invested more than seven years and $10 million in the state’s K–12 student-information database, federal grant records show. Yet the system apparently has no capacity to cost-effectively allow parents such as Eppolito to see the data collected on their children.

The system is called “SAIN”—for “System of Accountability Information in Nevada.” The “accountability” component appears oriented toward almost everyone but the students’ own parents.

The state appears to be violating the federal Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Under the law, parents are entitled to review and inspect their children’s educational records, whether maintained at the level of school, district, or state.

“They are supposed to provide [parents] the opportunity to inspect and review [records] upon request,” explained one official at the Family Policy Compliance Office (FPCO), the federal agency overseeing FERPA. “There shouldn’t be a fee for inspecting and reviewing the records.”

According to FERPA regulations, parental inspection applies to “[a]ny State educational agency (SEA) and its components.” The law does not allow these bureaucracies to charge fees for “copies” of records if “the imposition of a fee effectively prevents a parent or eligible student from exercising the right to inspect and review the student’s education records.” In no case may an educational agency “charge a fee to search for or to retrieve the education records of a student.”

Just a Misunderstanding?

After Osgood viewed FPCO’s statements via email, she wrote back that department officials “would like to speak with these same officials, to confirm that we have a shared understanding.

“NDE does provide free access to education records,” she said, citing the Nevada Report Card, but again insisted “SAIN was not designed for student-level inspection. Our understanding of FERPA is that this level of inspection applies to the LEA [local education authority]—i.e., the school district] and school.”

As far back as the Nevada Legislature’s 2003 special session, state lawmakers seeking federal dollars had agreed to establish a student-tracking data system. Under the reigning federal paradigm at the time—No Child Left Behind—the intent was to allow each state to track its pupils’ performance over time.

That was still the federal frame of reference in 2007, when the Nevada Department of Education put up a $5.5 million “match” and received a $6 million federal grant to expand what is now called SAIN.

Administration Expands Tracking

Beginning with the Obama administration, the federal government has sought to expand the amount of individual student data collected, shared, and analyzed by expanding state educational database systems to track individuals from their pre-kindergarten years well into adulthood, into data systems referred to as “Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems.”

For the past seven years, all Nevada public school students, including charter school students, have been “data-tracked” daily through school district “Student Information Systems.”

More than 800 data points are now collected and stored in SAIN. Under a $4 million 2012 federal grant, those data elements will evolve as Nevada expands its workforce longitudinal database system. Every night, the data points are automatically uploaded into SAIN, says Osgood.

Since 2009, SAIN-like systems have emerged and expanded across the country to store, connect, and share individual information across agencies and with other states and outside groups.

One such sharing consortium, Smarter Balanced, receives student data from Nevada. It describes itself as a “state-led consortium working collaboratively to develop next-generation assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards.”

Although Smarter Balanced calls itself “state-led,” it operates on a federal grant of $175.8 million, contractually obligated by the federal government to provide “timely and complete access to any and all data collected at the State level to [the U.S. Department of Education or its designated program monitors, technical assistance providers, or researcher partners, and to GAO, and the auditors. …”

“They can give information on my children to third parties, but I can’t see it!” said Eppolito. He is currently president of Americans for Better Schools, a grassroots organization in Nevada opposing Common Core State Standards.

Karen Gray (kg@npri.org) is a reporter for Nevada Journal. This article has been reprinted with permission.
Vocational Training Center Rolls Into Northern Mich.

By Isabel Lyman
“Fab Lab,” a 44-foot trailer, is North Central Michigan College’s latest acquisition.

The trailer houses a mobile digital fabrication lab and doubles as a classroom on wheels to equip students considering careers in high-tech manufacturing with relevant skills as they gain credits toward a college certificate or engineering degree.

Unveiled to the public at a ribbon-cutting ceremony in Petoskey, Michigan this spring, the Fab Lab contains 12 state-of-the-art computers loaded with design programs such as SURFCAM and AutoCAD, a lathe-turning center, and milling equipment. Inspired by a similar mobile unit based in Appleton, Wisconsin, the lab is distinct in its rural locale, offering workplace simulations and hands-on training to high school and college students interested in advanced machining.

Greg Chamberlin drives the Ford pickup truck that pulls the lab. He can easily set up shop in the parking lots of area high schools, the community college, or even local factories. Courses in the Fab Lab will be offered in fall 2014 and limited to 12 students, allowing for plenty of one-on-one coaching time and interaction with the instructor.

In keeping with a popular trend, lawmakers and governors throughout the United States, including Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder (R), are aggressively promoting vocational education alternatives and voc-tech careers. The training blends artistry with science, math, and engineering, and it can lead to fulfilling careers that do not require traditional college degrees. As machining becomes less about physical labor and more about technical skill, it requires some training but not traditional academic study.

The lab, a $350,000 investment, responds to manufacturers in the area who are looking to hire more employees, said Carol Laenen, communications director for North Central Michigan College.

Precision Edge Surgical Products and ACAT Global LLC (owner of a production facility in Charlevoix, Michigan) are among the private-sector entities that partnered with the college and the nonprofit Northern Lakes Economic Alliance to bring plans for this vehicle to life. Precision Edge, for instance, uses computer numerical control systems and is eager to dramatically increase the size of its workforce in the coming years with new hires from the region.

“We can really provide training for people to start getting the jobs which those companies are going to need to fill,” noted Kevin Glines, North Central Michigan College’s director of industrial fabrication.

Suburban School Students Are Not Superior to Low-Income Counterparts, Studies Find

By Joy Pullmann
According to two recently released studies, the schools middle-income families send their kids to are not as good as parents think.

A national study found U.S. students whose parents have college degrees perform worse than peers from comparable families in other countries. In the United States, 43 percent of such children tested “proficient” in math on an international test, compared to 71 percent of comparable students from Poland, 68 percent in Japan, and 64 percent in Germany. Of the 34 economically developed countries where the Program on International Student Assessment test was administered in 2012, U.S. students with educated parents performed better than those in only six countries.

A spring study of Illinois schools where one-third or fewer students were classified as low-income came to a similar conclusion. In 12 percent of such schools, more than half of the students in at least one grade level were not proficient on state math and English tests, the Pacific Research Institute study found.

“While many middle-class parents recognize the need for reform in schools located in poor, urban neighborhoods, they are often under the mistaken impression that because they live in safe, well-to-do neighborhoods, the schools attended by their own children are high-performing.”

LANCE IZUMI, KORET SENIOR FELLOW
SENIOR DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION STUDIES, PACIFIC RESEARCH INSTITUTE

America’s education structure, not just culture, is a factor in its schools’ mediocrity. While Asian countries perform better than the United States, so do European countries with very different cultures such as Poland and France, notes Paul Peterson, a coauthor of the national study and a professor at Harvard University.

“If you’re not a productive citizen, you’re not likely to be very happy,” he said, noting low-performing students are more likely to go to jail or be teen parents.

As solutions, he recommends limiting the influence of teachers unions, improving teacher quality, and increasing school choice.

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is a research fellow of The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
N. Carolina Legislature to Study Open Enrollment

By Ashley Bateman

A North Carolina bill that would let students enroll in any school district in the state was deferred to a study committee rather than brought for a vote.

The chairman of the subcommittee that pushed the proposal, state Sen. Fletcher Hartsell (R-Concord), has supported expanding charter schools, and the open-enrollment bill would have removed boundaries between charter and traditional public schools.

“For the short term, this isn’t going to be on the table,” said Terry Stoops, director of education studies for the John Locke Foundation. “We’re dealing with various budget issues right now, and I don’t think there’s much of an appetite for battling over a bill like this.”

Open enrollment allows students to enroll in any school district they can transport themselves to in the state, rather than requiring them to attend geographically assigned public schools. Twenty-one states have open-enrollment policies, according to the Education Commission of the States, but sometimes these require both the sending and receiving school district to agree to the transfer, reducing the likelihood students can exercise this option.

More Explanation Necessary

“There is growing support for open enrollment,” said Robert Luebke, a senior policy analyst at the Civitas Institute. “However, in order to get over the current hump, open enrollment advocates must be able to articulate why parents should enjoy these options, what benefits the policies bring, and how open enrollment will impact school finances.”

The bill considers various ways to lower boundaries between districts, home schools, and charter schools, but Luebke noted several aspects of the bill were not well-described. Financing details, eligibility, transportation, and whether schools can refuse transfers must be addressed further.

“I think the real issue was there were simply too many unknowns to really address the topic during the short session,” Luebke said.

Katherine Joyce, executive director of the North Carolina Association of School Administrators, voiced similar concerns.

“The proposed legislation ensures that our working families and less-privileged students will be unable to take advantage of school choice because it neglects the issue of transportation,” Joyce said. “Those families without the means to transport their children are left with limited options, which will result in a less diverse school population in regards to student ethnicity and socioeconomic demographics.”

‘Dire Consequences’ Forecast

Open enrollment doesn’t benefit all students, said Denise Watts, a superintendent in Charlotte-Mecklenberg Schools. Some barriers for especially poor families include work schedules, limited public transportation, and not owning a car.

“This bill will certainly create options for more kids whose families already have the means and savvy to exercise options, but it has dire consequences for the families who don’t,” she said. “We will only continue to leave behind the same kids trapped in the same schools that we deem underperforming. … Luck should never be the deciding factor in ensuring every child obtains a quality education.”

Luebke notes open enrollment programs offer more opportunities for families to choose schools than they currently have, rather than letting residence force kids to attend low-performing schools.

Future Possibilities

Two large school districts, Cumberland and Winston-Salem counties, have open enrollment plans within their attendance areas that have been fairly successful, Stoops says.

“In the long term, there is a possibility that some form of open enrollment or perhaps collaboration between home schools and district schools or district schools and charter schools is a possibility,” Stoops said. “I don’t think we’re going to see large-scale open enrollment that will allow kids to cross school boundaries, just because of the bureaucratic difficulties and the well-funded resistance to such a plan from teachers unions and school advocacy groups.”

Luebke says he thinks the bill will surface again in spring 2015. “I expect the education community will continue to fight many of the proposals and seek provisions to either limit the number of transfers or control the decisions about transferring,” Luebke said. “Who will win that battle is a question that hasn’t been answered yet.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.
Indiana Data Collection Unites Political Parties and Angers Parents

By Anna Giaritelli

Indiana is designing a database to store information about individuals’ schooling to improve vocational planning efforts.

“It sounds so sensible: We’ll talk to our friends, the big companies, find out from them what sort of training they would like their employees to have before they’re hired, revamp our education system to provide it, and enjoy the benefits of an improved business climate,” said Jane Robbins, a senior fellow at the American Principles Project. “But this corporatist model is incompatible with free enterprise and individual freedom.”

The Indiana Network of Knowledge—INK for short—will ostensibly improve the state economy by rolling out job-training programs based on in-state college students’ majors and certifications. To do this, it will electronically link students’ files between the state Department of Education, Commission for Higher Education, and Department of Workforce Development.

Expanding Data Collection

Over the past ten years, states have expanded such longitudinal data systems.

According to a Workforce Data Quality Campaign report, this effort gained significant momentum when the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 provided $250 million in federal funding to states.

Although the Hoosier State is now one of 18 states that have created legislation adopting data-collection plans, state Rep. Steve Braun (R-Zionsville), author of House Enrolled Act 1003, says he crafted a plan that takes these workforce data plans to the next level.

“There’s nobody currently that is looking at the future job market effectively and using that to inform the education system,” said Braun. “That is obviously the greatest value in terms of closing the skills gap because it really aligns the education system with the job market.”

National Economic Planning

The data collection effort began last September when Gov. Mary Fallin (R), chair of the National Governors Association, announced the bipartisan organization’s 2013–14 initiative would be “America Works: Education and Training for Tomorrow’s Jobs.”

“Governors are uniquely positioned to foster stronger connections between education and the workforce because within states, they are the sole individual who has responsibility for both public education and economic development,” Fallin said in reference to the program.

In March, Gov. Mike Pence (R) signed the Indiana bill into law.

In July, Pence appointed an executive director to a five-member agency that will oversee a long-term study, collecting data on elementary and high school state test stores, SAT and ACT results, college degrees, and salaries.

Some critics of the program fear it opens a Pandora’s box to government control of private data.

“The government simply has no right to track my child throughout his life to see where he works, what he makes, etc. I don’t care if the tracking would yield valuable information for economic planning; I don’t care if the large corporate donors support it,” said Robbins, a mother of two adult children. “In a free society, my child’s career choices—as long as they’re legal—are not an appropriate object of government scrutiny.”

Security Concerns

Other critics express concern about whether the state will implement proper security measures to minimize any hacking or thefts.

“This requires a crystal-clear legislative purpose—data may be used for these purposes and no others. It requires a clear legislative mandate for strong privacy and security, including legal liability for failure to follow that mandate,” said Fred H. Cate, director of the Center for Applied Cybersecurity Research at Indiana University’s Bloomington campus.

Those security and privacy standards should have been established when the bill was written, he says, but they are currently missing.

Although the plan includes security measures to repel hackers and will not contain a person’s Social Security number or criminal records, no system is 100 percent safe, and much personal information is still vulnerable, Robbins says.

“It’s irrelevant whether the student data is ‘anonymized,’ because in this era of Big Data and data-matching, there is no such thing as anonymization. Individuals will be identified, and the data will be hacked. It’s a question of when, not if,” Robbins said.

State officials appear willing to take that risk with other people’s money and information, she concludes.

Anna Giaritelli (annagiaritelli@gmail.com) resides in Washington, DC and specializes in congressional reporting. She has written for Roll Call, The Oregonian, The Washington Examiner, and The Daily Caller.

Oklahoma Legislature Loosens Third-Grade Reading Mandate

By Patrick B. McGuigan

It took only about 24 hours for both houses of the Oklahoma legislature to override Gov. Mary Fallin’s (R) veto of a bill loosening the state’s new third-grade reading test requirement.

The override rolls back state literacy requirements passed during the past two decades in efforts to reverse “social promotion.”

State Rep. Katie Henke (R-Tulsa) said House Bill 2625 “empowers parents and educators to make individualized decisions for Oklahoma students.”

Fallin opposed HB 2625 because she said testing data found 16 percent of Oklahoma third-graders could not read at their grade level this past school year. Nearly one-third of the students failed the reading test in Oklahoma City and Tulsa, the two largest public school districts.

“These children will now be asked to do more difficult coursework, and to do so with very limited reading skills,” Fallin said in a statement. “We are setting these children up for failure. We are asking them to succeed when we have not given them the skills they need to do so.”

Patrick B. McGuigan writes for Oklahoma Watchdog. This article is reprinted with permission.
U.S. House OKs Funding for DNA Tracking Program

Rhode Island may be first state to track students

By Vivian Hughbanks

A bill to reauthorize federal funding for newborn DNA collection passed the U.S. House of Representatives by voice vote on June 26.

Currently, the Newborn Screening Saves Lives Act of 2007 mandates the collection of blood samples from every newborn by heel prick. Labs screen the samples for diseases. Although many states allow for discarding the samples at that point, the new bill would collect each newborn’s DNA in federal databases for subsequent medical research and, in Rhode Island, tracking its owners’ education progress.

Neither existing law nor the reauthorization bill that extends the legislation until 2018 require informed consent from parents. The Senate approved similar legislation in January.

“It’s not appropriate for the government to know that much about any human being, much less a young, innocent citizen whose parents don’t know [the information is] being collected,” said Jane Robbins, a senior fellow of the American Principles Project.

In most states, parents may request an exemption from screening, but only for religious reasons. In Nebraska and West Virginia, parents may not refuse screening.

550 Million From Feds
Rhode Island appears to be the only state connecting a child’s newborn blood screening information to his or her state education record. With federal support for this linkage, Robbins predicts more state participation.

In 2011, Rhode Island received a $50 million Race to the Top Early Learning grant from the U.S. departments of Education and Health and Human Services.

In its grant application, the Rhode Island Department of Education (RDOE) said it would link the state’s child health information database, KIDSNET, to the state’s K–12 database. KIDSNET includes laboratory reports from newborn bloodspots, which involves DNA testing.

“Another key asset is that Rhode Island provides universal newborn screening to all infants and enters the data into KIDSNET, a public health data system that is used by primary care providers to identify the need for follow-up on areas of concern,” the 2011 grant application reads. “This database will be linked to Rhode Island’s PK–20 database as we develop the Rhode Island Early Learning Data System using a unique child identifier so that there is the ability to track progress and child outcomes over time.”

Rhode Island DOE claims it will not use DNA information provided in newborn screening data, and it denies DNA data are available to them.

“We will link our data with some screening data from the R.I. Department of Health; it is our understanding, however, that the Department of Health does not collect DNA samples,” said Elliott Krieger, a department spokesman, in an email. “In any event, no such data will be linked to data from this agency, nor would we use any such data.”

“There is no reason for [the government] to have [DNA] information, certainly when parents are not required to consent.”

JANE ROBBINS, SENIOR FELLOW
AMERICAN PRINCIPLES PROJECT

Tax Cap Exemptions Granted to 164 Pennsylvania School Districts

By Maura Pennington

More than one in three school districts in Pennsylvania is raising property taxes without the consent of their residents, due to a loophole in a state law.

In 2006, the General Assembly passed the Taxpayer Relief Act, also known as Act 1, requiring the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) to set an inflation index to limit the ability of Pennsylvania’s 500 school districts to increase property tax rates in a given year. If school districts wanted to go above the cap, the increase is supposed to be put before voters, but a program that gives districts exceptions to voter referenda has weakened the law.

Driven by Pension Costs
To get around the tax cap, school districts can apply for an exception from PDE for excessive special education costs, grandfathered debt from school construction, or retirement contributions.

For 2014–15, 316 school districts adopted resolutions promising not to increase tax rates above the allowable index, while 164 received exceptions. Of the 164 school districts granted exceptions, 163 applied because of pension obligations.

‘Able to Raise at Will’
“School districts have been able to raise property taxes at will to pay for the pension spike,” said David Baldinger, spokesman for the Pennsylvania Coalition of Taxpayers Associations.

Pennridge School District is 30 miles north of Philadelphia. It has a student population of 7,300 and employs about 500 teachers and 450 additional staff. The district applied for a $1.1 million exception to cover rising pension costs—a tax increase of 3.6 percent.

A homeowner in that district with a house assessed at the median value of $30,430 would have to pay $9,912 in property taxes, or $105 more than last year.

The Pennridge School Board may use money from its fund balance to decrease that by $33.

Even so, residents of that district will have to pay more next year to cover retirement costs for public employees.

Tax Hikes Exceed Wage Hikes
According to the Pennsylvania Independent Fiscal Office, the growth of school property taxes has been steadily exceeding wage growth since the early 1990s.

Since 1993, school property taxes in the state have increased by 146 percent. The Pennsylvania average weekly wage increased by 80 percent during that period.

“It’s going to get to the point where homeowners cannot pay the property taxes,” Baldinger said.

Maura Pennington (mpennington@watchdog.org) reports for Watchdog.org, where this article first appeared. It has been reprinted with permission.
A bipartisan bill that recently passed the U.S. House of Representatives would send more money to charter schools nationwide, but some charter advocates warn federal funding will inevitably decrease charter autonomy and quality.

More than 2.2 million students attend more than 6,000 charter schools across 42 states and Washington, DC. More than 1 million students now sit on charter school waitlists. Charter schools are public schools that receive curriculum, financial, and staffing flexibility in exchange for the threat of closure for poor performance.

The National Association for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), an advocacy group, worked closely with House leaders on The Success and Opportunity through Quality Charter Schools Act, HR 10.

The bill gives flexibility to schools using start-up grants, a significant boost according to NAPCS spokeswoman Katherine Bathgate. It would send more money to charters that meet federal requirements and would prioritize funds for states that do not limit charter school growth.

“The federal charter school program only allows for three-year grants to charter schools, so they’re limited grants for start-up funding only,” Bathgate said. “It’s not a situation where the federal government could be subsidizing interest rates or ongoing operational costs of charter schools. … Basically it’s there to help charter school leaders to open their doors and start helping students.”

Some school choice advocates are skeptical about HR 10’s likely impact.

“It seems like the bill is just trying to streamline funding streams that are already there,” said Michael McShane, education policy research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. “It’s not really creating anything new.”

Charters already spend time on lengthy applications to open, and increasing bureaucratic regulations will reduce the resources they have available for more productive pursuits, McShane says. Charters typically bypass much of the bureaucracy traditional public schools deal with, allowing providers quick access to funding.

“If states or charter schools take federal funds for states that do not limit charter school growth.

Finally, Bathgate said. “It’s not a situation where the federal government could be subsidizing interest rates or ongoing operational costs of charter schools. … Basically it’s there to help charter school leaders to open their doors and start helping students.”

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“The government has no cost authority to do this, and Republicans should recognize that,” said Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute.

If states or charter schools take federal money, charters inevitably will have to deal with growing federal interference in how they operate.

Bathgate says the potential for federal money outweighs concerns over accompanying federal regulation.

“Oh, obviously we don’t have to be a [flurry] of increased regulation,” Bathgate said. “At their core, charters are successful when they have the flexibility and autonomy to run their own schools and protect the needs of their students.”

A greater problem is that expanding charter schools can, paradoxically, reduce school choice, McCluskey says.

“There’s good evidence that charter schools often take kids who would otherwise have gone to private schools,” McCluskey said. “The ability to expand choice through charters may reduce overall choice by undermining schools that have a lot more autonomy [and] can be used by people who think religion is crucial to education. Although [expanding charters] may sound good, it could have very bad consequences.”

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

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Few Teacher Prep Programs Rate High in New Report

By Mary C. Tillotson

A week after a California judge ruled on a case involving teacher tenure, dismissals, and layoffs, the National Council for Teacher Quality released its annual report on another fundamental problem: the poor quality of teacher preparation programs.

“Teacher preparation is something that’s often overlooked, but very important,” said Alix Freeze, senior director of communications and advocacy at the Association of American Educators. “Study after study dictates that the most important thing is to make sure there’s a great teacher in front of students. Great teachers are the key to student success.”

Those concerned with education reform ought to look more closely at improvements to teacher training programs, says Arthur McKee, director of teacher preparation studies at NCTQ.

“It’s potentially a game-changer,” he said. “We know teacher quality is the most important in-school impact in student learning. If you look at reforms that have to do with teacher quality—tenure reform, evaluations—they’re very important, and we support many

as an organization, but we’re increasingly asking more of our teachers than before. If we’re going to say they have to do better to earn tenure or earn higher pay, or whatever consequences are attached to evaluations, we have to train them.”

Poor Academic Preparation

Teacher preparation programs, as a whole, need improvement, the report states. Only a quarter of the programs expect aspiring teachers to be in the top half of their college’s academic pool. Of 836 programs studied, only 26 elementary programs and 81 secondary programs made the top-ranked list.

On the report’s 125-point scale, most programs earned fewer than 50 points. “We’re not drawing from the top half of the population. Teachers are not getting instruction in teaching children how to read,” said McKee. “Just like we want to have well-trained doctors taking care of patients, we need to have really well-trained teachers so our students can learn.”

McKee suggests drawing teachers from more elite academic backgrounds and making sure prospective teachers have the skills required to teach students.

“Study after study dictates that the most important thing is to make sure there’s a great teacher in front of students. Great teachers are the key to student success.”

Alix Freeze, Senior Director

Communications and Advocacy

Association of American Educators

Paper Credentials Largely Worthless

States and local districts should remove barriers to entry into the profession, including many paper credentials, which have little, if any, correlation with teacher effectiveness in the classroom, argues Lindsey Burke, an education fellow at The Heritage Foundation.

Instead, teachers ought to be held to high standards once they’re in the classroom, she says.

“Enabling aspiring teachers and mid-career professionals an easier route to the classroom—but rigorously measuring teacher performance once hired—is a promising path to improve the teacher workforce,” she said.

For all the worthless or onerous regulations, some do help ensure well-trained teachers remain in classrooms, says Kate Walsh, NCTQ president.

In Tennessee, for example, candidates must demonstrate knowledge of the subject matter on a test before they can begin teaching high school, and student teachers can be assigned only to effective teachers.

Rough First Year

Many teachers see a dramatic increase in their abilities after their first year, but a good teacher preparation program can raise the bar for first-year teachers and help them be more effective right from the start, Walsh says.

“We’ve polled our membership in terms of teacher prep, and they’re definitely supportive of more rigorous standards for entering the profession,” Freeze said. “Many have reported feeling underprepared.”

Larry Sand, a retired California teacher of 24 years and president of California Teachers Empowerment Network, says he learned more in his first two days as a substitute teacher than he did in his two-year teacher preparation program in the 1980s. Teacher prep programs should include more on-the-job training and classes in classroom management, he suggests.

“You can sit in ed school for 10 years. You can sit in there for 20 years. Your first day in the classroom is going to be an education,” he said. “You’ll have 20 different kids with 20 different needs. Smart kids and not-so-smart kids, special-ed kids, brilliant kids, all in the same class.”

He recommended a system in which aspiring teachers intern or apprentice with “master teachers.”

“Let them sit in the classroom with a master teacher, a couple days a week for a year, and just sit and watch and ask questions and then eventually the student teacher will teach the class a few times and eventually they’ll become a teacher,” he said.

Consumer Guide

The review is intended to serve as a consumer guide, helping prospective teachers select quality programs and guiding superintendents and principals in hiring decisions. Walsh says she hopes this will pressure higher education and teacher preparation programs to improve.

Walsh says NCTQ has seen some improvement in teacher prep programs in recent years, but substantial improvements are needed for the United States to become internationally competitive.

“We’ve been trying to get the word out, initially with not much interest, but that’s changing,” Walsh said. “Teacher prep must be addressed for us to solve the problem of a substandard education system.”

Mary Petrides Tillotson is an education reporter for Watchdog.org.

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“Enabling aspiring teachers and mid-career professionals an easier route to the classroom—but rigorously measuring teacher performance once hired—is a promising path to improve the teacher workforce,” she said.
Federal Rules Bloat State Education Bureaucracies

By Ashley Bateman

Zealous education reformers at the state and national level often burden state agencies with tasks they are ill-equipped to perform, says a new report.

In “The State Education Agency: At the Helm Not the Oar,” authors Andy Smarick and Juliet Squire recommend rethinking the role of state education agencies (SEAs).

Accepting federal mandates in exchange for funding is the crux of the problem, said Lindsey Burke, the Will Skillman Fellow in Education at The Heritage Foundation.

“States report that 40 percent of the paperwork burden they deal with is to comply with federal regulations,” she said. “This is one of the reasons Texas didn’t apply for a federal Race to the Top grant. The governor and education commissioner said it would have only funded their schools for three days, but brought with it significant new compliance regulations.”

Hopping to the Federal Tune

A significant number of state employees spend their time administering federal programs, said Squire, an associate at Bellwether Education Partners: “What you have are some really dedicated people that can’t be deployed to new initiatives because their position is funded by a particular federal program.”

At a recent public event, John White, state superintendent of education for Louisiana, noted only 10 percent of education financing comes from federal taxes, but more than 50 percent of Louisiana education department staff spend their time complying with federal mandates.

There are now more than 100 federal education programs, including many competitive grant programs.

“With each new program comes more people, and it makes it more and more difficult for state-level leaders to streamline,” said Michael McShane, an American Enterprise Institute research fellow. “It creates these little fiefdoms.”

Big Issue Programs

The massive number of federal regulations under No Child Left Behind is a main reason the number of non-teaching staff in public schools has grown seven times as fast as student enrollment since 1970, Burke says. Teachers are now only half of all public education employees.

“No raindrop thinks it’s responsible for the flood,” McShane said. “How slowly but surely can these programs be consolidated, streamlined, dispersed to states in a way that offers more flexibility and less administrative [oversight], to allow the people on the ground to make the decisions?”

States are required to spend a certain amount of money on special education to receive federal funding, reducing the attractiveness of smarter spending, McShane says.

Recommending the Four C’s

The report authors recommend four major actions: Control, Contract, Cleave, and Create.

States should take more internal control of resources while streamlining data systems and compliance with state and federal laws, they say.

“Some of the recommendations are more immediately actionable than others,” Squire said. “Contract work is more actionable because states have already partnered with outside private companies or organizations to do a lot of work.”

SEAs were “not created—nor have they developed the core competencies—to drive crucial reforms,” the authors write. That’s why they should “cleave” from authorizing charter schools and similar programs.

That’s where “create” comes into play.

“We have to foster this section of [non-governmental organizations] that can step in and pick up the slack so states can be comfortable [cleaving] activities from government,” Squire said. “Some states have a little bit of that ecosystem, but a lot of states don’t.”

Effecting Reform

“While states do seem to have an addiction to that 10 percent of federal education funding, they are certainly longing for more flexibility from Washington mandates,” Burke said.

She pointed to Arizona, Florida, and Louisiana as models both for “the types of academic gains that are possible when states take charge and implement systemic reform” and “how to infuse previously unseen levels of innovation into their education systems” with school choice.

“The hope of the paper is that when state and federal policymakers are writing new laws and thinking about reforms they want to have happen, they consider that the SEA may not be the best organization to execute that policy or reform,” Squire said.

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Inside High Schools Where Students Earn Tuition

By Warren P. Howe and Bruce S. Cooper

The 26 U.S. Cristo Rey Catholic schools in the United States give their students a “day off” from school during the week to work in nearby businesses or offices, earning money to help pay for their private schooling.

In addition to making a little money, students attain new skills on the job, including important personal attitudes and professional behaviors that will help them find jobs and succeed in their lives when they grow up. That includes simple but crucial skills schools rarely teach: responding to questions, looking people in the eye when spoken to, and dressing and looking like a professional.

How It Works
Students are employed one day per week by professional organizations, known as Corporate Work Study Partners. The adolescents earn money that pays a significant portion of their tuition. They also gain the interpersonal acumen to succeed in school, on the job, and in life.

Students still attend high school classes four days per week on a schedule slightly lengthened to compensate for time spent at work. As one family member told the New York Times, “A smiling, confident 14-year-old knows he has a kind of opportunity that his parents hoped [for] when they left all they knew in Mexico for unknown chances in East Harlem.”

The model makes work an activity that enhances the education experience in two very different settings: one professional, the other academic.

Cristo Rey in New York
Many families living in Midtown New York City send their children to exclusive private schools at great expense. But Cristo Rey New York High School is in East Harlem, a half-block from Park Avenue.

The school, founded in 2004, operates in a renovated, brick-faced nineteenth-century building that once served as a tenement house and later a convent. The school serves 393 students, 80 percent of whom are Latino. More than 50 percent are girls. Students must come from low-income families who, except for the Cristo Rey program, would not be able to send their child to an academically superior private school.

Don Bosco Cristo Rey High School in Tacoma Park, Maryland has four-student teams rotate to cover Monday workdays. Each student in New York also works one day per week but in teams of five, with each student covering one of the week’s five workdays.

“The five-student grouping seems to work better,” said School President Fr. Joe Parkes, S.J.

New York work-study sponsors are heavily weighted toward the finance and insurance industry, with firms such as Deutsche Bank, JP Morgan Chase, Morgan Stanley, New York Life, and MetLife participating. Other corporate and community clients represent industries such as law, media, health care, accounting, education, and real estate.

The Corporate Work Study Program in New York does not entirely finance students’ tuition at Cristo Rey but supplies enough revenue to reduce family costs dramatically. Families pay an average of $1,350 in annual tuition.

Abiezer Mendez graduated in 2008. While a Cristo Rey student, he worked at JP Morgan, earning nearly 50 percent of his tuition. Mendez says work taught him to balance his time and keep commitments. After graduation, he enrolled at Fordham University, which he found initially intimidating. But his academic and professional experience gave him the skillset for success. After graduating from Fordham in 2011, he accepted a position at JP Morgan.

Bronx native Dominique Rodriguez had lived in a homeless shelter with her mother and older sister. Her father, in and out of jail, was largely absent. She reasoned school was her only escape. Fortunately, her principal at Sacred Heart Grade School allowed her to continue attending the school even after the family could no longer afford tuition.

Qualifying for a high school education at Cristo Rey led Rodriguez to win a Horatio Alger national scholarship selection in 2012, receiving a $20,000 scholarship toward college at either Syracuse University or Barnard College.

Five Critical Qualities
The Cristo Rey model has five critical qualities that could be used to educate children elsewhere:

1. Children pay for their own educations: The Cristo Rey model helps poor children pay their own way in receiving an education, long called “work-study.” Their internships can evolve into careers, and some employers write valuable recommendations.

2. Children learn to work: Obeying a dress code, speaking well, being responsible, using proper language, and looking people in the eye all become part of children’s education, skills not often modeled for them in poor neighborhoods.

3. Dress code: Learning to dress is important for poor children as they move into collar professional jobs.

4. Professional conduct: Cristo Rey schools place students in real work environments where they are expected and taught to speak clearly, dress properly, and act like adults.

5. Networking: Often the employers of these children act as future employers or help these inner-city kids find and keep jobs after college and beyond.

“We serve students who have demonstrated the potential and motivation to achieve success and who do not have the educational background to attend another school of its kind.”

FR. JOE PARKES, S.J., PRESIDENT
Cristo Rey New York High School

Bruce S. Cooper, Ph.D., is professor of education leadership at Fordham University.
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