North Carolina Voucher Program Upheld, Expected to Expand

The North Carolina Supreme Court ruled on July 23 the state’s Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) is constitutional, reversing a ruling by Wake County Superior Court. The Opportunity Scholarship Program, enacted in 2013, provides scholarships of up to $4,200 per year to low-income families to send their children to the school of their choice.

‘A Win-Win’
Dick Komer, senior attorney for the Institute for Justice (IJ) who served as lead counsel for two

PARCC Consortium Shrinks to Just 7 States

The number of states participating in the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) Common Core-aligned testing consortium has fallen from 26 plus Washington, DC in 2010 to just seven states and Washington, DC today, according to the Pioneer Institute.

Ohio abandoned PARCC on June 30, making it the latest state to back out of the consortium. Ohio officials decided in July to use the standards created by the American Institutes for Research (AIR), which has partnered with the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. AIR already administers Ohio’s standardized social studies and science tests.

Robert Holland, a senior fellow

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By Heather Kays

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Despite Problems, Education Savings Accounts Show Promise in Mississippi

By Jeff Reynolds

A n innovative new education law in Mississippi expands school choice options for parents of special-needs students.

After protests arose because the initial rollout of the law placed onerous burdens on parents who applied, the Mississippi Department of Education (MDOE) relaxed the restrictions, and the law is now showing great promise.

Senate Bill 2695 set up a five-year pilot program for up to 500 parents per year in Mississippi to apply for educational savings accounts (ESAs) in order to customize the education of their special-needs children. The ESA legislation became law in April. Funding for each ESA can be as much as $6,500. Parents can use ESA funding for a wide variety of services, including private school tuition, tutoring, and advanced therapy.

Early in June, as the July 1 launch approached, MDOE received criticism for the burdens it placed on parents applying for the program.

Empower Mississippi, a free-market think tank, issued a strong statement criticizing the rollout of the program. The criticisms included a very short application window over summer vacation, the inability to view application documents prior to the opening of the application window, and limited ways to send in applications.

Fixing the Problems

It appears officials addressed many of these problems, according to Empower Mississippi. Empower Mississippi President Grant Callen says MDOE has increased the application window and posted the application online.

“This is a great improvement from the initial 10-day application window, which would have limited access to these scholarships,” said Callen.

“They’re now saying that once the enrollment has reached 50 percent of the available ESAs, all approved applications will be placed on a waiting list and MDOE will determine a deadline for a random selection process for the remaining scholarships.”

Callen lauded the innovative nature of the new law.

“This law represents a dramatic leap forward in the way we educate students with special needs, and more broadly, the way we think about public education in Mississippi.”

GRANT CALLEN
PRESIDENT
EMPOWER MISSISSIPPI

Jason Bedrick, a policy analyst for the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, says the Mississippi ESA program represents a great advance in education freedom.

“ESAs empower families to completely customize their child’s education,” said Bedrick. “This is particularly important for families that have students with special needs. Sometimes, a student’s assigned district school is unable to meet his or her needs, so the ESA enables him or her parents to seek out alternatives. In Arizona, a 2013 survey found that parents of students with special needs were unanimously satisfied with the education they were able to purchase for their children with an ESA.”

Bedrick says the ESA model is the future of education in Mississippi and other states.

“In Arizona, the ESA program was originally limited to students with special needs, as in Mississippi,” said Bedrick. “However, the legislature has subsequently expanded program eligibility several times. It now also includes students assigned to district schools with a ‘D’ or ‘F’ letter grade according to the state accountability system; children of active-duty military members; youth adopted from the state’s foster care system; and students living on Native American reservations. I expect that we will see states such as Mississippi, Florida, and Tennessee expand their eligibility criteria over time as well.”

LEARN MORE


Court Upholds North Carolina Voucher Program

Continued from page 1

families and litigated on behalf of those who wanted to use OSP, told School Reform News the continuation of the choice program is a victory for all students. “The decision is important for all of the schoolchildren in North Carolina, because by allowing low-income families to attend private schools, the public schools will be forced to take those low-income students’ needs more seriously,” said Komer. “It is a win-win both for the students who leave the public schools for private schools and for those who remain in the public schools.”

In 2014, Judge Robert Hobgood put the program on hold and then ruled it unconstitutional. The families represented by IJ appealed the decision to the court of appeals, which allowed the program to continue while the cases were under consideration. The state supreme court, in a move that surprised some policy experts, took the cases into consideration. The program to continue while the court of appeals heard them.

The state supreme court decided the North Carolina constitution “specifically envisions that children in our state may be educated by means outside of the public school system.”

North Carolina taxpayers aligned with the North Carolina Teacher’s Association, the North Carolina School Board Association, and 70 school boards brought the lawsuit against the school choice program, according to Renee Flaherty, an attorney for IJ. The plain-tiffs argued the Opportunity Scholarship Program takes money directly from public schools, no taxpayer money should ever go to private schools, and the program allegedly did not serve a public purpose.

Komer says during nearly two years of litigation, he had to argue against ridiculous claims based on the same attacks teachers unions and other school reform opponents regularly use against school choice programs.

Fortunately, the supreme court recognized that the constitutional theories of the opponents were completely specious,” said Komer. “Of course education of all students is a public purpose, and the state constitution does not limit this to public education exclusively.”

In practical terms, the court’s decision “means that schools cannot continue to take low-income students for granted,” Flaherty said.

Expansion Expected

The program could at least double in size in the fall and continue to grow. State officials have already awarded 2,642 scholarships for the 2015–16 school year, compared to 1,216 during the 2014–15 school year, and OSP could issue more than 1,700 additional vouchers once the state budget is signed into law during the 2015–16 school year.

IJ client Cynthia Perry says she will be sending her daughter Faith to a private school using a scholarship from OSP.

"I'm delighted," said Perry. "I just think it's a wonderful thing that parents do have a choice. Every child is different, and I don't think the county schools are meeting the needs of students with special needs."

Perry says she thinks the smaller class size will help her nine-year-old, who has been diagnosed with ADHD.

Faith has had to attend summer school every year since 1st grade while attending traditional public schools, according to Perry.

Faith has been unable to make progress in reading comprehension, Perry says. “Even with all the extra stuff we do at home, she's still struggling,” Perry said.

Seeking Better Values

Perry says she thinks the private school setting will also align better with the Christian principles she tries to instill in her daughter.

“No matter what you teach at home, there is so much to be picked up in the public schools, including things that are not so good for your children,” Perry said.

Perry says she hopes other parents in North Carolina will apply for the Opportunity Scholarship Program and parents in other states will fight for similar programs.

“I think it’s important because every child should have an opportunity,” said Perry. “Just because parents can’t afford a private school doesn’t mean that the child should be held back.”

Heather Kays (hkays@heartland.org) is a research fellow with The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
California Districts Sued for Dismissing Test Scores from Teacher Evaluations

By Bruce Edward Walker

School districts in California are violating state law by ignoring student test scores when evaluating teachers, according to a lawsuit filed in July by Students Matter on behalf of two teachers and four parents of former and current students.

The plaintiffs allege 13 school districts are violating California’s 1971 Stull Act, which specifically requires school districts to consider students’ standardized test scores as one of four criteria when evaluating teachers.

Students Matter is a national non-profit organization promoting access to quality public education. It most recently garnered national attention for its involvement in the lawsuit that overturned California’s teacher tenure law in Vergara v. California.

The group filed Doe v. Antioch on July 16 in Contra Costa County Superior Court. The defendants are school districts that have signed union contracts forbidding the use of student test scores in teacher evaluations. According to the complaint, approximately 250,000 students are enrolled in the 13 districts named in the suit.

‘Opponents of Change’

“The teachers unions are fighting a law that is designed to hold teachers accountable for the educational progress of their students,” said Ed Ring, executive director of the California Policy Center, a think tank promoting fiscal sustainability in government and improving public education.

“Accountability is expected in every other profession, and there is no profession where accountability is more important than in the education of our children,” Ring said. “Across a full spectrum of bipartisan reform ideas—charter schools, enforcing parent trigger laws, extending the time required for tenure, and layoff and dismissal policies—the primary opponents of change are the teachers unions.”

‘Simply Breaking the Law’

“A lot of California school districts are simply breaking the law,” said Ben Boychuk, an education analyst and associate editor of City Journal. “The Stull Act is 44 years old. A superior court judge has already ruled the Los Angeles Unified is out of compliance. And just when it looked like the district and the United Teachers Los Angeles had come to an agreement, negotiations fell apart.

“It shouldn’t take a second lawsuit to compel school districts to comply with an existing ruling,” Boychuk said.

“The Stull Act does give districts some leeway in applying test scores to teacher evaluations,” Boychuk said. “There is plenty of room for innovation and for mischief. The teachers unions believe student performance should have no part in evaluations whatsoever. But that isn’t what the law says. Districts are colluding with the unions to break the law.”

Lawsuit ‘A Natural Next Step’

“The filing of Doe v. Antioch is a natural next step for Students Matter, which promotes the message that our education system must prioritize students’ best interests above all else,” said Students Matter spokesman Manny Rivera.

“While Vergara highlighted the importance of teacher quality in the classroom by challenging harmful teacher employment laws, Doe v. Antioch was filed to enforce the current law on teacher evaluations, the Stull Act,” said Rivera. “This lawsuit does not try to replace or modify the law. The case enforces the Stull Act by challenging collectively bargained evaluation systems that explicitly prohibit the inclusion of standardized test scores in the assessment of teacher performance.”

Antioch calls into question whether factors that affect student achievement should change through collective bargaining agreements.

According to the suit, “Petitioners and Plaintiffs ... are parents, teachers, and other concerned taxpayers from across California. They seek a writ of mandate to compel the 13 largest offending school districts to meet their obligations ...”

“As shown in Vergara, an effective teacher is the most important school-based factor affecting student success,” said Rivera. “Teacher effectiveness cannot be divorced from student performance. Doe v. Antioch illustrates the problems that can occur when the standards for teacher evaluations, including the use of student testing data, are subject to collective bargaining. If we want to focus on what is best for students, accountability and the use of student achievement measures in teacher evaluation systems must not be part of broader collective bargaining negotiations. Student success is not negotiable and should never be on the bargaining table.”

Bruce Edward Walker (walker.editorial@gmail.com) is a policy analyst for The Heartland Institute.

INTERNET INFO


“Accountability is expected in every other profession, and there is no profession where accountability is more important than in the education of our children.”

ED RING, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
CALIFORNIA POLICY CENTER

How To Fix Our Schools

Lessons of Hope is Joel Klein’s inside account of his eight-year mission to improve New York City’s schools. Klein demanded accountability, eliminated political favoritism, and battled a powerful teachers union that seemed determined to protect a status quo that didn’t work for kids.

Klein’s initiatives resulted in more school choice, higher graduation rates, and improved test scores. The New York City model is now seen as a national standard for meaningful school reform. But the journey was not easy. Klein faced resistance and conflict at every turn.

Purchase Lessons of Hope on Amazon.com for $22.55 hard cover
Wisconsin Advocates Fight for Homeschool Diplomas

By Diana-Ashley Krach

State law changed after a teacher’s aide in a Wisconsin private school was removed from her position under an obscure legal provision that did not recognize homeschool diplomas as fulfilling the work requirements needed to be a teacher’s aide.

Because the aide did not take or pass the General Educational Development (GED) test, the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) contacted the private school regarding the aide’s graduation status, stating her homeschool diploma was insufficient. DPI told the school officials they would lose private school choice program funding if they continued her employment.

Until this incident, the provision in the Wisconsin biennial state budget for fiscal years 2015–17 requiring a GED or a high school diploma from an accredited school had gone largely unnoticed. Once it became clear the teacher’s aide could not continue her employment, the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) stepped in and pushed for a change in the budget.

HSLDA’s Scott Woodruff played an instrumental role in persuading the legislature to change the language of the law, which now allows homeschool diplomas to fulfill the graduation requirement.

Wisconsin State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Evers wrote a letter to Gov. Scott Walker (R) asking him to veto the change in the budget. Despite efforts of the Wisconsin Parents Association (WPA) and DPI to block the change in state law, Walker signed the bill in July. Teaching aides are now considered qualified to work with a diploma from a home-based private educational program.

Woodruff says if HSLDA had filed a lawsuit, it would have had to prove a home school is a private school under Wisconsin law, which would open up home schools to the same regulations private schools face.

DPI ‘Refused to Accept the Obvious’

“Homeschool parents in Wisconsin, like homeschool parents in all states, have the inherent authority to issue a high school diploma to their homeschooled child,” said Woodruff. “Families did not need an act of the legislature to prove that. This measure was necessary only because one agency, the Department of Public Instruction, refused to accept the obvious.”

Evers’ letter to Walker claimed easing requirements for teaching aides would not be in the best interest of students.

Protecting Homeschoolers Rights

WPA had distributed a petition opposing the budget bill change, because it said the change could expose homeschoolers to further state regulations and give the government authority to define the requirements for a homeschool diploma.

“Our statewide homeschool organization worked to create the good homeschooling law we have in Wisconsin and has worked for 31 years to maintain it despite continual challenges,” said WPA Executive Director Larry Kaseman.

The Wisconsin Christian Home Educators Association says changing the graduation requirements would not be a setback for the homeschool community. It worked with Woodruff and HSLDA to ensure no other homeschool graduate would lose his or her job because of DPI’s decision.

“It’s very gratifying to see a process we initiated in partnership with Wisconsin Christian Home Educators Association come to fruition in a way that will help thousands of Wisconsin families,” said Woodruff.

Diana-Ashley Krach (krachcreative@gmail.com) writes from Lake Worth, Florida.
California Judge Rules in Favor of Families in Parent Trigger Case

By Heather Kays

A n Orange County, California Superior Court judge ruled that Palm Lane Elementary School could become a charter school after the court validated a petition parents filed under the state’s parent trigger law.

The July ruling came after the Anaheim City School District (ACSD) board had refused to accept the petition from parents. Since the court’s decision, ACSD has voted to appeal the ruling.

Under the state’s parent trigger law, a school must undergo reform if a majority of students’ parents sign a petition requesting a specific change, such as converting the school into a charter school or changing the administration. Schools that have been determined to be low-performing for several consecutive years are eligible for the parent trigger option, which originated in California in 2010 and has spread to six other states. Connecticut, Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, Ohio, and Texas have enacted similar laws.

Parents Forcing Reform

E. Vance Randall, professor of education policy at Brigham Young University, says parent trigger laws are valuable because they give parents a way to reform broken local schools unwilling to change on their own.

“It provides a possible way for parents whose children are stuck in persistently failing schools to improve the quality of education for their children,” said Randall. “Public education has failed these parents and their children over and over again. Public education officials in these particular locales should lead, follow, or get out of the way.”

Randall says the school board’s intense scrutiny of the list of parent signatures is typical and a common problem facing school reform advocates across the nation.

“It is not surprising at all,” Randall said. “A district should examine the list of parent signatures to see that they are valid, but in many cases the district is simply trying to find any possible reason to reduce the number of valid signatures. They will usually throw up any roadblock or excuse in order to derail this parent initiative. Why? Because jobs, funding, and power are at stake, and these things seem to be more important to some district officials than providing a quality education for children trapped in persistently failing schools that are failing to provide a quality education for these children.”

Patrick Wolf, a professor of education policy at the University of Arkansas, says it is ironic school officials are fighting so hard to stop the parent trigger process.

“The defenders of the traditional public school system often claim that it is superior to choice-based systems for delivering education, because the public school system is more responsive to citizens,” said Wolf. “Isn’t it strange that when citizens actually try to influence the public school system, through the parent trigger process, the supposedly democratic traditional public school system decrtes and seeks to undermine their efforts? I think the main moral of the story is that we can’t expect the educational establishment to voluntarily share power with parents. Parents have to seize it.”

‘Very Empowering and Uplifting’

Mehul Patel, communications manager for Parent Revolution, says the Palm Lane decision is an encouraging sign for parents across the state.

“The Palm Lane decision is very empowering and uplifting for all parents in California,” Patel said. “This decision puts parents that have children trapped in chronically low-performing schools at the center of the educational debate. … [It also encourages] the conversation about school performance and how parents have the right to intervene when they know their child’s school is low-performing.”

‘Powerful’ Negotiating Tool

Some groups of parents have been able to force the changes they want to take place at their children’s schools simply by stating they will use the parent trigger, Patel says.

“One of the most powerful aspects of the parent trigger law is that parents can use it as a negotiating tool,” said Patel. “It gives parents the opportunity to tip the scales of power in their favor. In California, Parent Revolution has worked with three specific schools where parents collected signatures, and the district brought them to the table to negotiate specific goals and demands that the parents had.”

“This is the only political leverage that parents have left to get the kind of changes that are needed to provide a quality education,” said Randall. “Remember that education is inherently political, and when school boards do not adequately represent the needs of parents and children, what recourse do these parents have? Parent trigger laws give parents a tool to help bring about needed change when the education system, with its political dynamics, fails.”

Heather Kays (hkays@heartland.org) is a research fellow with The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
PARCC Consortium Shrinks to Just Seven States

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for The Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News, said, “Smarter Balanced has been losing states as well as PARCC. Large numbers of parents in Oregon and Washington State opted their kids out of Smarter Balanced testing in spring 2015, and the governor of Oregon, a Democrat, signed a bill allowing parents to opt out of standardized testing for any reason.”

Central to Opposition Efforts
Ze'ev Wurman, a U.S. Department of Education official under George W. Bush and currently an executive with Monolithic 3D, a California-based technology company, says getting rid of PARCC is necessary if Common Core opposition is to have any real effect.

“It is very important to dismantle the consortia,” said Wurman. “They are federally funded in contravention to federal laws prohibiting the Department of Education to involve itself in curriculum and testing. ... Their stated purpose, [according to] their own ‘architects’ like Linda Darling-Hammond, is not to measure how children are doing but rather to change the way teachers are teaching.”

Holland agrees getting rid of the testing consortia is an important first step toward taking down Common Core.

“I know Bill Gates and PARCC leaders have celebrated the connection between the national tests and national standards, [as well as] how this connection will drive a unitary curriculum,” Holland said. “It makes sense: You teach to what is tested. If PARCC is in a death spiral, as appears to be the case, and possibly the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium as well, it surely would be a great victory for parents, teachers, and others opposing Common Core. Although the other side, with all its riches, could try to steer the states toward adopting comparable assessments.”

Wurman says Common Core cannot function without nationally standardized tests.

“They are the actual whip that [pushes] states toward Common Core,” Wurman said. “Without them, Common Core is mostly a dead letter on paper. To get their grants, they had to sign a contract with the Department of Education forcing them to provide individual-student-level data to the feds on an ongoing basis. Nothing states do [to try] to claim ownership of their students’ data will help as long as they are consortia members. Federal law trumps state laws.”

Public Backlash Against Testing
Many states have been dropping out of PARCC in response to a widespread public backlash against the nationalizing impulse behind Common Core, technical problems during testing, and complaints by parents and activists who say too much classroom time is devoted to test preparation instead of useful learning.

Bob Schaeffer, public education director of the National Center for Fair & Open Testing, says the fight against Common Core has made strange bedfellows.

“Pressure from two different but overlapping grassroots movements converged to make so many states back out of the PARCC consortium,” said Schaeffer. “Both Common Core critics and assessment reform advocates opposed PARCC testing. Though the groups differ on many issues, they agreed Common Core tests had to go. Widespread test administration failures increased the momentum for change. Together, they built sufficient political pressure to force policymakers to reverse direction.”

Wurman says the end of the federally backed testing companies would be a crucial step toward regaining local control of curricula.

“Once the testing goes, the Common Core becomes empty words on a piece of paper,” Wurman said. “Once each state is able to direct its own test any way it wants, it will also be able to modify the standards as it wants. Nothing will force it to stick to Common Core ... anymore.”

‘An Ill-Supported Idea’
Wurman says the nationalization of education standards is a big mistake.

“Smarter Balanced has been losing states as well as PARCC. Large numbers of parents in Oregon and Washington State opted their kids out of Smarter Balanced testing in spring 2015, and the governor of Oregon, a Democrat, signed a bill allowing parents to opt out of standardized testing for any reason.”

ROBERT HOLLAND, SENIOR FELLOW, THE HEARTLAND INSTITUTE

“There is no reason or evidence that the U.S. needs nationalized education, and data show no correlation between national standards and educational achievement,” said Wurman. “Further, we have no idea if there is even such a thing as ‘the best’ way to teach or test children, and even if there is, we certainly have not found it.

“The top-achieving countries in the world, such as South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, all have quite different curricula and testing regimes from each other, yet they are all very successful on international benchmarks,” said Wurman.

Heather Kays (hkays@heartland.org) is a research fellow with The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
New Jersey Senate Passes PARCC Opt-out Resolution

By Bruce Edward Walker

The New Jersey State Senate adopted a nonbinding resolution in July asking New Jersey Commissioner of Education David C. Hespe to develop guidelines for supervising students who do not participate in the state’s Common Core-based Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) testing by September 1, 2015.

A prominent school choice group in the state says the resolution is not nearly enough.

Different districts currently treat non-participating students differently. For example, some districts use a “sit and stare” policy for nonparticipants, requiring them to remain in the same room as test participants, while being given nothing to do. Students in other districts are allowed to occupy school rooms separate from test participants, either to conduct independent reading or to perform another school assignment.

The reform advocacy group Save Our Schools—New Jersey (SOSNJ) says it considers the nonbinding resolution woefully insufficient.

One representative at SOSNJ, who asked not to be named, told School Reform News, “New Jersey parents do not want our legislators to vote on non-binding resolutions begging the commissioner of education not to abuse our children. We want our legislators to ensure that our children are safe.

“The New Jersey Assembly did exactly that by unanimously approving legislation that protects students from retribution for not taking PARCC,” said the SOSNJ representative. “That legislation is supported by a bipartisan majority of the New Jersey Senate and has a quarter of the senators as co-sponsors. However, Senate leadership has refused to allow the Senate to vote on that bill. This toothless resolution is not going to satisfy New Jersey parents.”

The nonbinding resolution addresses the great uncertainty parents and students have experienced when students are opted out of testing and would provide clear policies, formed by the state’s commissioner of education, on how to deal with students opting out of testing “given the absence of a universal policy.”

The resolution reads in part, “The guidelines should prohibit a school district from taking punitive action against a student including, but not limited to, the adoption of a sit and stare policy in response to the student’s refusal to participate in the Statewide assessment.”

Common Core Backlash

The resolution, introduced by state Sen. M. Teresa Ruiz (D-Essex), quotes preliminary data from the commissioner of education that reveals the percentages of families who opted out of statewide assessment testing during the spring 2015 term. Fifteen percent of 11th grade students, 7 percent of 9th grade students, and 4 percent of all elementary school students elected not to take the PARCC testing.

“As we move forward to provide a testing framework that is conducive to the success of students, we must also take into account the needs of parents who may have concerns,” Ruiz told School Reform News. “This resolution aims to address this issue by directing the commissioner of education to establish clear guidelines that will help to accommodate students whose parents have asked that they not participate in the PARCC test without punitive actions being taken against them.”

Bob Bowdon, executive director of Choice Media, a New Jersey-based education policy website covering K-12 education policy, says he thinks Common Core will come to an end in New Jersey one way or another.

“The backlash against Common Core is becoming so widespread, it will soon collapse under its own weight,” said Bowdon. “Finding someone who still supports Common Core reminds me of a snipe hunt I participated in as an adolescent, particularly if you’re interested in the rarest, most exotic breed of 2015 Common Core advocates: one not supported by the Gates Foundation.”

“[T]he best single resource for understanding and fighting back against Common Core that exists.

— Logan Albright, Policy Analyst, FreedomWorks

COMMON GROUND
ON COMMON CORE:
Voices from across the Political Spectrum Expose the Realities of the Common Core State Standards
18 essays, foreword by Ron Paul

INTERNET INFO

Bruce Edward Walker (walker.editorial@gmail.com) is a policy advisor for The Heartland Institute.
Comment on Wis. Choice Spending Sparks Debate

By Bruce Edward Walker

Recent comments by a former Republican state senator on a Wisconsin television program have sparked a debate over how much the state actually allocates for its private school voucher program.

Wisconsin spends less than 1 percent of its $5.2 billion annual education budget on vouchers, Theodore J. Kanavas claimed in the June 12 episode of The Insider. The statement earned a “half-true” assessment from PoliticoFact.com Wisconsin in the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel. PoliticoFact.com concluded the true percentage is between 3 and 4 percent.

“People quibble if 1 percent is precisely accurate, but either way, the cost of the voucher program is a very small percentage of overall education spending,” said Jim Bender, president of School Choice Wisconsin, a nonprofit school choice advocacy organization based in Milwaukee. “Additionally, opponents fail to consider how much it would cost if the districts had to educate the students currently supported with a voucher. It is common knowledge that most schools in the parental choice program educate students for less dollars than the public sector.

“The Legislative Fiscal Bureau (LFB) released an estimate of the resources required to fund the legislature’s proposed expansion of the statewide program,” Bender continued. “They created a range of between $600 and $800 million over the next decade. LFB notes that the resources required for public schools over that same time period total $94 billion. That’s billion, not million. So for all the handwringing over the cost of the program, after a decade of growth all over the state, the statewide program will cost less than 1 percent of the education resources allocated over that time.’’

In addition to affirming the accuracy of Kanavas’s statement, choice advocates say there is much greater demand for quality education alternatives than the system can accommodate.

“School choice in Wisconsin has given tens of thousands of low-income families the ability to leave the public schools for a private school of their own choosing,” said CJ Szafir, associate counsel and education policy director at the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty in Milwaukee. “It is successful, with some private schools boasting high wait lists. This has made choice a target for the educational establishment. “Unfortunately, with all the misinformation out there from the educational establishment, [PolitiFact.com] gave immense scrutiny to a statement by a proponent of school choice,” said Szafir. “PolitiFact is splitting hairs with its fiscal analysis, and even when provided with new information from the nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau that supported Sen. Kanavas, it refused to change its rating.”

Bruce Edward Walker (walker.editorial@gmail.com) is a policy analyst for The Heartland Institute.

Michigan Union Officials Inflate School Pensions

By Tom Gantert

Three past presidents of Michigan’s largest teachers union inflated their public school pensions by exploiting a legal loophole that allows them to count their six-figure private-sector positions working for the Michigan Education Association (MEA) as if they were employed by the public school system.

The union officials’ pension-spiking arrangements go back to the early 1990s, when the school districts in which they worked counted them as “educators on loan” to the state’s teachers union. Michigan state law allowed the deals, but very few people knew of their existence.

Big Pension Differences

Current MEA President Steve Cook was a part-time para-professional in the Lansing School District, where he worked 25 hours a week prior to becoming a full-time union official with the MEA in 1993. Cook earned a salary of $201,613 in 2014 working for MEA, and he is eligible to use his union salary and his 22 years as a full-time union official in his calculations to determine his public school pension. When Cook retires, his pension will be an estimated $105,000 a year.

Pensions in 2014 for former MEA presidents Iris Salters and Luigi Battaglieri totaled $140,000 and $85,903, respectively.

Battaglieri’s public school pension would have been an estimated $9,058 if it were based in his years of service as a teacher and his teacher’s salary of $34,659 in 1992, when he left for MEA.

MEA did reimburse the school districts for their costs, but those payments weren’t enough to cover the full cost of the past MEA presidents’ pensions.

The Michigan Public School Employees Retirement System carries $26.5 billion in unfunded liabilities, according to the annual actuarial valuation report from the accounting firm Gabriel Roeder Smith & Company. This means the state is playing catch-up to cover these unfunded liabilities, making higher payments as a result. When the union made its calculations for how much to reimburse the districts, it didn’t anticipate this added cost.

Public-Private Taxpayer Exploitation

James Hohman, assistant director of fiscal policy for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, says it’s wrong to make taxpayers pay for private-sector employees.

“This is inappropriate for any private employee,” Hohman said. “That private employee’s public pension is going to cost taxpayers.”

JAMES HOHMANN, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF FISCAL POLICY MACKINAC CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY

INTERNET INFO

College Board Releases New AP History Framework

By Heather Kays

The College Board released a new version of its Advanced Placement U.S. History framework in late July.

Since major revisions were implemented in 2014, the standards have been mired in controversy over accusations of liberal bias.

In the July version released by the College Board, some of the controversial statements, such as referring to President Ronald Reagan’s rhetoric as “bellicose,” have been removed, and a section on national identity was added to the framework.

Stanley Kurtz, a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, says the College Board merely removed the most controversial items from the framework instead of addressing concerns about what was missing.

“The College Board has removed the most obviously biased statements, and that’s better than having them there, but in the end, the basic, problematic left-leaning bias remains there,” said Kurtz.

“The framework continues to focus on conflicts of identity, race and class, globalization, and gender identities,” said Kurtz. “These are not illegitimate issues, but ... the center of American history continues to be deemphasized, to be replaced by these fashionable topics instead.”

Frederick Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, says the new version is a great improvement.

“It has now put our founding ideals and experiences front and center, scrubbed away the agenda-driven progressive characterizations, and addressed the habit of framing every historical event in terms of contemporary identity politics,” Hess said.

Ohio Bill Would Give Local Districts Control Over Standardized Tests

By Andrea Dillon

Ohio school districts might enjoy increased local control if House Bill 212, the Local Authority Restoration Act (LARA), becomes law during the state’s current legislative session.

A key element of the bill is a provision that would allow districts to choose their own standardized tests.

The 2015–17 budget passed by the Ohio Legislature and signed by Gov. John Kasich (R) in June dropped the use of the Common Core-aligned test known as the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and replaced it with an equivalent test written by the American Institutes for Research (AIR). AIR has partnered with the Common Core-aligned Smarter Balanced Assessment tests.

LARA would allow districts to choose the Common Core replacement test created by AIR, which was adopted and funded by the budget, and would let districts pick their own normed test.

Restoring Local Control

The bill’s author, state Rep. Andy Thompson (R-Carroll County), told School Reform News the return of local control is vital but difficult to achieve.

“That was really the point: to have local control and the part about the assessments being tied to the standards, where you fight a battle with the feds on that one because they are trying to force you to take the assessments they are prescribing,” said Thompson.

“It’s going to be putting that prohibition into law so that districts can choose in the State of Ohio either a normed referenced Iowa exam or an assessment that would be tied to Massachusetts’ standards.”

State Representative Carroll County, Ohio

“We’re going to be putting that prohibition into law so that districts can choose in the State of Ohio either a normed referenced Iowa exam or an assessment that would be tied to Massachusetts’ standards.”

Andy Thompson

“Many of our school board members have a role to play,” Thompson said.

“There are certainly things I’d like to see added or changed, but I find it a fair-minded, reasonable framework for studying the sweep of our nation’s remarkable history.”

Kurtz says the framework still fails to give proper attention to the founding of the United States, freedom of religion, the European monarchy, and individual liberty. He also cites a neglect of important events in the nation’s history.

“Diplomatic and military topics and much political history are still left out,” said Kurtz. “The War of 1812 is not even mentioned.”

Heather Kays (hkays@heartland.org) is a research fellow with The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.

“If you don’t have a prohibition in your state code about that, then they can try to make you take the assessments that they prescribe,” Thompson said. “We’re going to be putting that prohibition into law so that districts can choose in the State of Ohio either a normed referenced Iowa exam or an assessment that would be tied to Massachusetts’ standards. We wanted to have standards that have in the past been proven effective elsewhere and were created before Common Core was created.”

Thompson says Kasich is wrong when he claims curricula is being created locally to adjust to Common Core.

“This increasing federalization and the increasing control of our state education departments by the federal government is eliminating any sense that our school board members have a role to play,” Thompson said.

Districts Should Take Advantage

Other provisions in LARA that seek to increase local control include eliminating the data-collection-heavy statewide Kindergarten Entry Assessment. LARA also includes changes to the end-of-year exam structure, a move supporters say will increase instruction time and reduce time spent on testing.

While LARA has yet to become law, Greg Lawson, state house liaison and policy analyst with the Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions, says he thinks Ohio school districts will take advantage of the local control LARA offers.

“I think a decent chunk of Ohio’s school districts would, if given the authority to do so, absolutely take advantage,” Lawson said. “Now, I do think that it’s safe to say not all school districts will do that.

“The bottom line is this: We should have local control,” said Lawson. “Schools should be able to choose if they want to go in that direction. This legislation clearly moves in the direction of being able to do that.”

Andrea Dillon (thell1885@gmail.com) writes from Holly Springs, North Carolina.
How Important Is Homework for Student Success?

By Herbert J. Walberg and Joseph L. Bast

Once a child is enrolled in school, the time for homework starts.

Sending children home from school with homework is a long tradition that has come under criticism by some psychologists and writers as being a form of punishment.

However, a recent review of research published in 1987–2003 conducted by a team of researchers from Duke University found “all studies, regardless of type, had design flaws, but there was generally consistent evidence for a positive influence of homework on achievement.” The strongest effect of homework on achievement occurred for students in grades 7–12.

Students who learn to delay gratification while young are most likely to focus while they complete challenging homework assignments. All children and adolescents, however, can benefit from parent involvement in their homework. In a review of more than a dozen studies, such involvement resulted in higher rates of homework completion, fewer problems with assignments, and higher levels of achievement.

Parents who thoughtfully encourage their children during homework reinforce the learners’ persistence and nurture their evolving self-control. Such remarks during homework reinforce the learners’ persistence. “Doing homework is often a child’s first encounter with having to focus on and practice doing something that doesn’t come from parents or isn’t entertaining. It is an opportunity to measure progress and reward success while instilling good habits and teaching study skills.”

Parents who well-connected with parents in other families are likely to be more helpful to their children and others’ children.

Though the Swanns’ experiences are unusual, with access to new digital learning opportunities and greater flexibility of work hours and telecommuting, similar stories are becoming more common. Hard-working students may be ready to leave high school for college well before turning 17 or 18 and would gain little benefit from additional “seat time.”

Doing homework is often a child’s first encounter with having to focus on and practice doing something that doesn’t come from parents or isn’t entertaining. It is an opportunity to measure progress and reward success while instilling good habits and teaching study skills.

Making sure homework is completed on time and helping their children remain constructively engaged in school connects parents to schools and to educators who are entering the child’s life for the first time. Parents well-connected with parents in other families are likely to be more helpful to their children and others’ children.

Victoria earned bachelor’s degrees at age 15 and master’s degrees at age 16.

Thursday, October 8, 2015

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KEYNOTE SPEAKER
Angelo Codevilla
Professor emeritus of international relations at Boston University and fellow of the Claremont Institute

HEARTLAND LIBERTY PRIZE
Donald Devine
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Senate Passes No Child Left Behind Reauthorization

By Tom Gantert

The U.S. Senate approved a bill that would replace the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the controversial education law Republicans and Democrats have heavily criticized.

Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN) sponsored Senate Bill 1177, the Every Child Achieves Act of 2015 (ECAA). The Senate passed Alexander’s bill with an 81–17 vote on July 16. ECAA has to be reconciled with the House version of the bill before a final vote could send the legislation to President Barack Obama’s desk.

Neal McCluskey, director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Education Freedom, says NCLB was well-intentioned but did not live up to its promise. Critics of NCLB say it relies too heavily upon standardized test scores, which McCluskey says do not fully capture a student’s progress.

“The House and now the Senate have passed No Child Left Behind rewrites, and on their faces, they are considerable improvements [compared to] the law they would replace,” McCluskey said. “Both would end illogical ‘adequate yearly progress’ requirements, for instance, and eliminate the cascade of punishments that go with them.

“Still, both bills still pose big dangers, with language that appears to give the secretary of education backdoor power to shape state standards, tests, and accountability by vetoing plans he or she decides would be ineffective,” McCluskey said. “More fundamentally, the Constitution gives Washington, DC authority to do almost none of the things in this bill, and almost none of what it has done over the last five decades.”

‘Missed Opportunity’

Lindsey Burke, the Will Skillman Fellow at The Heritage Foundation, says ECAA doesn’t fix some of the essential flaws in NCLB.

“This is a significant missed opportunity to restore state and local control of education,” Burke said.

ECAA consolidates, but does not eliminate, most programs, and it does not significantly reduce spending or eliminate all of the federal mandates that burden schools, says Burke. The bill also fails to allow states to opt out of the programs initially authorized under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which ECAA would reauthorize.

“On both sides of the aisle, most people agree that No Child Left Behind is broken,” Burke said. “It is not working.”

The House and Senate versions of the bill are each more than 600 pages long, and Burke says they would probably create new unintended consequences and increase federal intervention.

“The National Education Association (NEA) says it is in favor of ECAA. The national teachers union says it made an ‘unprecedented member engagement’ effort to get ECCA passed, with 26,000 petition signers and 2,000 face-to-face meetings with members of Congress and key staff.

Burke says it’s unlikely NEA would support a bill it knew would reduce spending on education.

“Conservatives should be wary of a proposal that has been praised up and down by the teachers union,” Burke said.

Reducing Federal Involvement?

Gary Naeyaert, executive director of the Great Lakes Education Project, a nonprofit organization working for education reform in Michigan, says he’s optimistic ECAA would reduce the amount of federal involvement in education policy.

“After years of inaction in Washington, DC, we are pleased with [the] passage of [Senate Bill] 1177, the Every Child Achieves Act, by a strong bipartisan majority in the U.S. Senate,” Naeyaert said. “While there are a number of issues yet to be finalized, such as intervention measures for failing schools, teacher evaluations, whether federal funds will follow students to the school of their choice, and additional testing or ‘opt out’ requirements; we expect the final bill to reduce the federal footprint in K–12 education and return local control to states and districts.”

Frederick Hess, resident scholar and director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, says even though ECAA is an improvement, much could be done to strengthen the legislation.

“It’s hardly perfect,” said Hess. “There’s no Title I portability, it includes a new pre-K provision, and so forth. Given my druthers, I prefer the House bill. But ECAA is vastly better than NCLB and a massive improvement over Obama’s waiver-fueled status quo.”

Tom Gantert (gantert@mackinac.org) is senior capitol correspondent for Michigan Capitol Confidential, a daily news site of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.

INTERNET INFO


“No’ On No Child Left Behind Reauthorization (S. 1177),” Heritage Action for America, July 6, 2015: http://heritageaction.com/key-votes/no-on-no-child-left-behind-reauthorization-s-1177/
By Jeff Reynolds

Homeschooling increased in Florida in 2014, with 7,000 students leaving public schools for home education programs, according to data published by the Florida Department of Education (FDOE).

The increase in the number of homeschooled children marks a strong growth trend that has continued over a period of several years, with the increase in 2014 being the largest in at least a decade. The northern Florida regions of Duval County and Jacksonville have led the way, having the most homeschool students in the state.

According to FDOE’s website, “More than 60,000 students in approximately 42,000 families are in Home Education Programs throughout Florida.”

Karen Harmon, director of Home Education Resources and Information (HERI), says parents turning to homeschooling have expressed deep concerns about what they see as the poor quality of public schools. The Jacksonville-based HERI is one of the oldest support groups for home schools in Florida.

“I know that many parents are realizing that the public school system does not allow for their child to express their religious beliefs, nor does it allow for the child to be protected from things that contradict the parent’s or the child’s moral stance,” said Harmon.

Concerns About Public Curricula

Harmon says the quality of the curriculum is another important factor for parents who decide to homeschool their children.

“Another possible reason is that parents are beginning to understand what Common Core is, and they do not want their student to be taught to perform at an average level,” Harmon said.

“The feeling is that with Florida State Standards being taught, we will lose the educational opportunity to develop engineers, doctors, scientists, and other professions that require higher-level thinking.”

The Florida State Standards are the state’s math and English standards for public schools, which were revised in 2014 but are not substantially different from Common Core standards.

Homeschooling parents appreciate being able to customize their children’s education, Harmon says.

“I would start with curriculum choice,” Harmon said. “The parent decides what materials they want to use, hopefully considering the style of learning that best suits their child. Another top benefit is the calendar. Our family schooled year-round, with six weeks on and two weeks off, and this kept our momentum up and our enthusiasm.

“It also allowed us to avoid the crowds on vacation because everyone else was in school,” Harmon added.

By Danni Ondraskova

Two Arizona tax credit scholarship programs reached their funding cap limits within a week of each other in early July.

The programs expand school choice for Arizona children who may not otherwise have the opportunity to attend private schools.

One program benefits low-income students and is supported by corporate and individual donations given to scholarship-providing nonprofit organizations. Corporations and individuals donating to these organizations receive tax breaks. Every year since the program was initiated, the Arizona government has raised the cap on tax breaks provided to corporations. In 2015, the cap is $52 million, up from $43 million in 2014.

It took 10 weeks for corporate donations to reach the cap in 2014; it took only three days to reach the cap in 2015, on July 8.

The second program gives students with disabilities scholarships to attend the schools of their choice, with the state providing a tax credit for corporate donations. The cap for 2015 donations eligible for tax credits is $5 million, and the program reached its limit on July 10.

For the first time, S-corporations were allowed to receive state tax credits for their donations, which totaled 9.2 percent and 2.1 percent for the first and second program, respectively.

Making the Case for Expansion

Lance Izumi, a senior fellow and senior director of education studies at the Pacific Research Institute, says the success of these programs shows Arizona and other states should expand choice.

“First, these two programs have met the real needs of students and therefore enjoy broad support in the community,” Izumi said. “Second, there is obviously a large demand on the part of donors to participate in these programs, so Arizona lawmakers should consider enlarging the programs so that more businesses can donate to these programs and more children can receive scholarships.”

Izumi says imposing corporate tax credit limits on scholarship donations does children a disservice.

“Government-imposed caps necessarily limit the reach of choice programs such as these to assist every student who needs and wants assistance to attend a private school that will better address his or her particular challenges.”

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PACIFIC RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Danni Ondraskova (danni.heartland@gmail.com) writes from Chicago, Illinois.
New Orleans Parents
Call for More Choice

By Paul Dauphin

New Orleans parents say school choice has improved their children’s educational opportunities in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, but they are still pushing for greater reform and more school choice options.

On July 23, several parents had an opportunity to be heard publicly on the issue of school choice during a panel discussion on the state of public education 10 years after Hurricane Katrina.

The panel composed of eight parents, all of whom have children who attend New Orleans charter schools, tackled topics such as enrollment, accountability, school governance, and parental involvement.

Further Improvement Sought

The panelists agreed public education in New Orleans has improved in the past decade but must continue to move toward excellence.

“Pre-Katrina there were no options,” said Kimya Bishop-Cole, mother of two children who attend charter schools. “Your child had to go to a district school. It might be close to your home, but you might end up with a failing school.”

Referring to New Orleans’ all-charter public school landscape, many of the parents say they have been more connected to the authorities in their children’s schools under a charter model than when conventional, union-controlled public schools dominated the scene.

“Now you can go to a charter board meeting and voice your concerns,” said Roshand Miller, a mother of three children in public schools. “Charter schools have made it more accessible to parents.”

Mixed Feelings On Enrollment System

Parents expressed mixed feelings about OneApp, a unified enrollment system in which families can sign up to attend a variety of the city’s public schools, as well as the private schools, participating in the Louisiana Scholarship Program.

“Honestly, [OneApp] made us better as parents because we are doing more research and are able to see where our children are going to school,” said Bishop-Cole. “We are looking at [school] ratings. Before, we didn’t have that option.”

Isiss Donate, a single mother of two, is unhappy with the OneApp system after trying unsuccessfully to enroll her son in a neighborhood school.

“There are two ‘A’ schools in my neighborhood, and he didn’t get into either,” said Donate. “If I live here, he should be able to go to school here.”

Miller says it is less about the enrollment process and more about the overall quality of schools.

“If they were all ‘A’ and ‘B’ schools, you wouldn’t be so frustrated when you didn’t get your first choice,” said Miller.

Calling for Excellence for All

The panelists say all of the city’s schools should be at the same level as the handful of New Orleans schools parents say are “excellent.”

“We shouldn’t have to drive across town and fight to get our children into ... [quality schools such as] Lusher, Audubon, and Baby Ben,” said Miller. “They should all be [like] Lusher, Audubon, and Baby Ben.”

“It’s a new climate,” said Lamont Douglas, who has children in three charter schools. “Parents are going to have to come together to make all of our schools good and get involved in their children’s education.”

Paul Dauphin (pdauphin@federationforchildren.org) is communications director for the Louisiana Federation for Children.

INTERNET INFO


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For more information visit civicseducationinitiative.com, call 480/745-8237 or send an email to sam@civicseducationinitiative.com. We look forward to hearing from you!
Michigan Legislators Attempt to Reform ‘Union Leave Time’

By Tom Gantert

Legislators in the Republican-controlled Michigan Legislature are trying to prevent tax dollars from being used to pay public school union members for taking “union leave time” to do union business, rather than teaching classes.

The practice, known as “release time,” is employed throughout Michigan.

Senate Bill 280, introduced by state Sen. Marty Knollenberg (R-Troy) in April, would make it illegal for any public school union contract to permit government employees from being granted union leave time to do union work.

The bill is now under review by the state’s Senate Commerce Committee.

Thirty-Nine Districts

The Mackinac Center for Public Policy brought attention to the issue in 2011, when it surveyed release time policies in every school district in the state. The survey found 39 of the 862 school districts in existence in 2011 paid a combined total of at least $2.7 million per year to teachers for time spent working on union business.

The Mackinac Center says in the Ann Arbor Public School District, teachers union president Linda Carter does not teach any classes, but the school district pays half of her $77,502 annual salary. Carter devotes all her time to union business. The school district also covers the entire cost of Carter’s health care and pension benefits.

The district has a similar arrangement with the local union’s vice president, who spends 50 percent of her time on union business and the other half as a schoolteacher, according to the Mackinac Center. The annual cost to Ann Arbor Public Schools for those deals is greater than $250,000, which includes expenses related to replacing the union members with other teachers when they are not teaching.

‘Flagrant Abuse’

“Taxpayers should not be subsidizing organized labor, especially when these same unions claim there is not enough money going for vital services,” said F. Vincent Vernuccio, director of labor policy at the Mackinac Center. “The practice in Michigan and other states that pay for union work with taxpayer-funded salaries needs to stop.”

Antony Davies, an associate professor of economics at Duquesne University’s School of Business, says such policies result from unions sowing “deliberate confusion.”

“The fact that the [National Education Association] represents teachers’ interests is not problematic,” Davies said. “This is, after all, the whole point of a labor union. What is unacceptable is that the NEA encourages taxpayers to think of it as an organization that is committed to education rather than what it actually is: an organization that is committed to educators.”

Davies says Michigan unions use the term “release time” in a misleading way.

“Release time is what you get when your employer releases you from your work responsibilities and doesn’t pay you,” Davies said. “This is not uncommon in universities, where research faculty will raise money from outside sources to reimburse their universities for a portion of their salaries in exchange for being released from teaching some of their assigned courses. The important part is that the employee is released from some of his responsibilities in exchange for not being paid. To be paid and released from work, as is happening in the Michigan public schools, is not release time at all. It is paid leave.”

Taxpayers Paying for Lobbying

Davies says it’s unfair to force taxpayers to pay people to work for a union that lobbies the government for more taxpayer dollars.

“If public schools produced extremely well-educated students, we might look the other way,” Davies said. “But when fewer than 80 percent of Michigan’s high school students graduate within four years, one might well ask if taxpayers’ dollars would be better spent paying people to teach rather than paying them to lobby for more pay.”

Tom Gantert (gantert@mackinac.org) is senior capital correspondent for Michigan Capitol Confidential, a daily news site of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.

Nev. Enacts Two Choice Bills in Same Legislative Session

By Heather Kays

Nevada is one of only a few states to enact two school choice programs within the same legislative session, according to the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

In April, the state enacted its first school choice program, a tax credit scholarship for low- and middle-income families. In June, Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval (R) signed into law the nation’s most inclusive education savings account (ESA) program.

According to Chantal Lovell, deputy communications director of the Nevada Policy Research Institute, more than 650 families signed up for the ESA program within the first week it became available. The state Treasurer’s Office began accepting applications on July 31.

Lovell says the strong interest for the program will be helpful when opponents bring legal challenges against the ESA program. Lovell says groups such as her own are already organizing to address possible lawsuits, which she says are all but inevitable.

Heather Kays (bkays@heartland.org) is a research fellow with The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
Well-Informed Parents Are Essential in the K–12 Education Marketplace

“Public schools, which enjoy a near-monopoly in K–12 education, enrolling nearly 90 percent of all students, want to maintain or increase their market share by portraying themselves positively. Toward that end, they exaggerate the children’s performance levels.”

By David V. Anderson

Considerable anecdotal and statistical information suggests the parents of K–12 schoolchildren in the United States are generally unaware of the performance levels of schools in their communities.

Data suggest this is true for all economic strata, not just low-income Americans.

Well-informed parents are essential to ensure good educational quality. This assertion is based on a fundamental principle of the discipline of information economics: Consumers need reliable information about the goods and services they seek to purchase. This is a necessary condition for a healthy marketplace.

Without the necessary information, education consumers will likely make unwise choices. The experts tell us the private and public suppliers of education will have an incentive to cut costs by reducing quality. They’ll be able to “get by” selling their “lemons” to the unsuspecting.

Consumers of K–12 education are lost in a sea of misinformation. We need to help these parent consumers wise up, so they’ll know how to better direct their children’s education.

Disguising Failure

One reason for the absence of good consumer information is the understandable desire among school officials to make their institutions look good, even if they are underperforming.

Public schools, which enjoy a near-monopoly in K–12 education, enrolling nearly 90 percent of all students, want to maintain or increase their market share by portraying themselves positively. Toward that end, they exaggerate the children’s performance levels.

They do it both at the school level, where report cards grossly inflate student achievement, and at the state level, where official testing typically shows twice as many students as do the trusted numbers provided in the Nation’s Report Card. The Nation’s Report Card shows the findings of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and gauges academic achievement in the K–12 education marketplace.

It is a policy advisor for The Heartland Institute.

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They do it both at the school level, where report cards grossly inflate student achievement, and at the state level, where official testing typically shows twice as many students as do the trusted numbers provided in the Nation’s Report Card. The Nation’s Report Card shows the findings of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and gauges academic achievement of elementary and secondary students in the United States.

Nonprofit private schools enjoy a reputation, probably not deserved, as being significantly better than public schools. Sometimes they publish information about their students’ test results to show their superiority, but they often don’t tell you for equally situated students who have similar home environments, the private schools and public schools are roughly tied. The Nation’s Report Card measured the proficiencies of 8th graders who are economically disadvantaged and found 21 percent of private school students and 20 percent of public school students are proficient in both reading and math. Statistically, that’s a dead heat.

School authorities, whether public or private, show no awareness of the conflict of interest that arises because schools possess the dual responsibilities of instruction and testing, which is the standard measure for determining a school’s success. This arrangement is traditional and well-established, so it is rarely viewed as corrupt.

Need for Honest Numbers

What can be done to ensure parents get reliable information about their children’s achievement and a school’s performance?

We need honest performance numbers for schools in every community. They are not available now because the public schools lie about their numbers while the nonprofit private schools happily bask in the sunlight emanating from the popular misconception about their so-called superiority. And for reasons not fully understood, the minuscule numbers of for-profit schools hide in the shadows, afraid to force their way into open competition with the others.

Aren’t there stakeholder groups out there who could obtain honest numbers and get the attention of parents? What about civic organizations, such as Kiwanis, which purport to work on improving K–12 education? Where are the business organizations, such as chambers of commerce or education industry trade associations? Why can’t the media and other publishers highlight these problems? And aren’t there any education entrepreneurs willing to risk their investment by using aggressive marketing based on reliable student and school achievement reports?

Each of these potential agents of change is fearful of the community reaction that could come if they were to help parents get this needed information. Shame on them.

David V. Anderson (david.anderson@asoraeducation.com) is a policy advisor for The Heartland Institute.
Pernicious Egalitarianism Denies Algebra to Smart, Capable 8th Grade Students

By Barry Garelick

The San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) decided recently to eliminate first-year algebra for 8th graders. Algebra will now be offered only in high school. Of course, it is a mistake to allow students to take algebra if they are not prepared for it. To succeed in algebra, students must have already achieved mastery of fractions, percentages, decimals, ratios, and negative numbers and be able to solve a variety of word problems. But if a student is qualified to take algebra in 8th grade and would do well in it, why not give the child that opportunity?

A growing trend among school districts is to limit or eliminate entirely advanced learning opportunities for students, because the districts claim Common Core discourages acceleration of individual students. Districts increasingly prefer for students to wait until high school before taking algebra as a result.

Common Core, however, defines four possible educational pathways that help students learn math at an appropriate pace, based on the student’s skills. One allows for taking algebra prior to reaching the 9th grade via a “compacted” version of the traditional pathway. No content is omitted under this pathway and students can complete the content of 7th grade, 8th grade, and high school introductory algebra in grades 7 and 8.

Many schools and districts had such pathways in place before Common Core was implemented, but following the implementation of Common Core, schools and school districts are making it more difficult for students to qualify for compacted pathways.

I witnessed this first-hand in 2014, when I was teaching pre-algebra and algebra at a middle school in the San Luis Coastal Unified School District (SLCUSD) in California, during a time when school districts were making the transition to Common Core.

Limiting ‘Accelerated Math’

Several of us math teachers were told by a district official the district was limiting the “accelerated math” program, in which qualified students in 8th grade, and even some in 7th grade, had been allowed to take the Algebra 1 course early. It would be available only for “truly gifted” students, as she termed them, determined by a new test the district would administer to 6th and 7th graders for algebra placement purposes: the Silicon Valley Mathematics Initiative (SVMI), a group of math reformers funded by the Noyce Foundation.

I spoke up at this point, asking district officials, “If it’s never been given before, how is it going to be considered in making the decision for placement?”

The response: “That’s something the district is going to have to determine once we see the results.”

The only guidance I was given was because it’s a new test, it won’t be counted as heavily as the MDTP test.

I recall from one of my pre-algebra classes a very bright girl who said she hoped she would place into Algebra 1. She in fact scored higher than 80 percent on the MDTP and did well on the SVMI test.

“I don’t want to be with the stupid people,” she said to the girl who sat behind her.

This kind of attitude is probably a dominant factor in causing some school districts to react against acceleration. Another reaction has been to open up algebra in 8th grade for all students, no matter how weak their preparation. We’ve seen that is a mistake.

‘Newly Formed and Very Small Elite’

I spoke up at this point, asking district officials, “If it’s never been given before, how is it going to be considered in making the decision for placement?”

The response: “That’s something the district is going to have to determine once we see the results.”

The only guidance I was given was because it’s a new test, it won’t be counted as heavily as the MDTP test.

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The opposite and equally wrong reaction is SFUSD’s “nobody gets to take algebra until high school” policy.

The 8th grade traditional Algebra 1 class has become an endangered species, open only to a newly formed and very small elite.”

By Barry Garelick

Barry Garelick (barryg99@yahoo.com) has written extensively about math education in various publications, including The Atlantic, Education Next, Educational Leadership, and Education News. He recently retired from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and is teaching middle and high school math in California. Garelick is the author of Teaching Math in the 21st Century, which recounts his experiences as a long-term substitute in a high school and middle school in California.
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10 Principles of Privatization
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10 Principles of Federal Tax Policy
10 Principles of Higher Education Reform
Defend Mobility & Homeownership

The Obama administration has joined many state and regional governments in making war on the automobile and suburbs. This makes housing and transportation less affordable and puts extra burdens on low-income families.

Defending the Suburbs

Portland, Oregon, metro-area planners have set a target of reducing the share of households living in single-family homes from 65 percent to 41 percent by 2040. HUD has approved rules requiring suburbs of single-family homes to subsidize apartment construction for low-income families. The Cato Institute’s Randal O’Toole and other speakers will show how you can defend your neighborhood from plans such as these.

American Dream Conference
Austin, Texas
November 6–8, 2015

Partial List of Speakers

- Scott Beyer, Market Urbanism
- Robert Bradley, Institute for Energy Research
- Wendell Cox, Demographia.com
- Leoroy Gilmore, Reason Foundation
- Leoroy Gilmore, Reason Foundation
- Jesse Hathaway, Heartland Institute
- Jeff Judson, Heartland Institute
- Ed Kilduff, Common Sense Alliance
- Marlo Lewis, Competitive Enterprise Institute
- James Quintero, Texas Public Policy Foundation
- Jim Skaggs, Coalition on Sustainable Transport
- Ron Utt, Maryland Public Policy Institute
- Joseph Warren, Arlington Transit Advisory Committee

Defending the Automobile

The Washington legislature has set a target of reducing per capita driving by 50 percent by 2050. President Obama supports a plan to require that all new cars be fitted with “vehicle-to-infrastructure” devices that will allow government to remotely turn off your car if you drive “too much.” The Reason Foundation’s Baruch Feigenbaum, Competitive Enterprise Institute’s Marc Scribner & Marlo Lewis, and other speakers will show how you can respond to such plans.

For More Information

The 2015 American Dream conference on The Future of Affordability will help you defend your right to live and travel the way you want. The 2015 conference will take place in Austin, Texas, on November 6–8.

In the past year, American Dream Coalition members helped defeat expensive light-rail and streetcar proposals in five different cities. Representatives of these groups will show how you can fight obsolete transportation plans in your city.

American Dream Conference Agenda

The conference begins with an tour of Austin transportation & land-use projects. If you don’t plan to attend the tour, the conference begins at 5:30 pm Friday and ends after lunch on Sunday.

- Friday, November 6: Optional tour, including Austin’s failed commuter train
- Friday evening: Welcome dinner & debate
- Saturday AM, Nov. 7: Transportation
- Saturday PM: Land-use issues
- Sunday AM, Nov. 8: Grassroots organizing
- Sunday afternoon: ADC membership meeting

“One of the four best conferences I’ve ever attended.”
—John Fund, National Review

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Defending Wasteful Transit

In the past year, American Dream Coalition members helped defeat expensive light-rail and streetcar proposals in five different cities. Representatives of these groups will show how you can fight obsolete transportation plans in your city.

Fighting Wasteful Transit

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“The American Dream Coalition’s 2015 conference on the Future of Affordability will help you defend your right to live and travel the way you want. The 2015 conference will take place in Austin, Texas, on November 6–8.

“Attending the Preserving the American Dream conference provided me and my association many tools and helped us have our most successful legislative year to date.”
—Mark Nix, South Carolina Home Builders

For More Information

The 2015 American Dream conference on The Future of Affordability will take place at the Crowne Plaza Austin, 6121 North IH-35, Austin, Texas 78752. To register for the conference, go to americandreamcoalition.org or send $229 (by October 15; $249 after) to ADC 2015 Conference, P. O. Box 76, Camp Sherman, Oregon 97730. Add $50 if you wish to go on the optional tour.

The Crowne Plaza Austin offers a conference rate of $119 per night good any nights from November 2 through 10 if you make reservations by October 16th subject to room availability. Make reservations by calling 512-323-5466 and say you are attending the Preserving the American Dream conference or reserve on line using the link at our conference registration page or entering “adc” in the group code on Crowne Plaza’s reservation page.

americandreamcoalition.org

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