



Making Schools Work Better for all Children

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Vol. 3, No. 8 *SCHOOL CHOICE: Catch a Wave! At least that's what's happening in dozens of schools in **Florida**, with new path-breaking research now finding that there indeed is a major ripple effect from the establishment of Florida's A+ program that provided the first lifeboat ever for children in failing schools – and apparently a good kick in the pants for schools on the verge. The new study shows that the existence of Opportunity Scholarships for children in failing schools not only help the kids who take the scholarships – it helps the kids who stay by driving improvements in failing schools. Conducted for Florida State University, Harvard University's Program on Education Policy and Governance, and the Manhattan Institute, the study shows that schools receiving a failing grade from the state and whose students would have been offered tuition vouchers if they failed a second time achieved test score gains more than twice as large as those of other schools. The study also establishes that the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) math and reading results are highly correlated with the national Stanford 9 exam – meaning that the FCAT is a reliable measure of student performance. Bottom line: The performance of students on academic tests improves when public schools are faced with the prospect that their students will receive vouchers. For a full copy of Greene's report, go to <http://www.manhattan-institute.org>. For last year's report on how school choice drove public school reform in Florida, see [COMPETING TO WIN, How Florida's A+ Plan Has Triggered Public School Reform](#). See also related news articles at:

- http://www.sptimes.com:80/News/021601/news_pf/State/Researcher_praises_th.shtml
- <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/02/16/national/16VOUC.html>

The ripple effect extends to standards, as well, as recent news reports show that an emphasis on **Virginia's** Standards of Learning (SOL) have resulted in some schools there adding courses to help students catch up and some schools putting great emphasis on training teachers. "But the principal tool for SOL test success," notes a Washington Post article by Jay Mathews, "appears to be varied and imaginative teaching," quoting one teacher as declaring "My goal isn't for students to just pass the test, but to get the highest possible score. We do a lot of critical-thinking-type questions. We break down the question in order to answer it correctly." Also in **Florida**, the grassroots are getting organized. The legislature's Education Innovation Committee there is today considering HB 303, which will provide vouchers to students in schools that are more than 120 percent over capacity. The bill, described briefly in [last week's NEWSWIRE](#) would save millions in school construction costs, and lessen the burden on overcrowded schools. * **POLLS:** It's all in the way you ask. Months ago, we pointed out that support for school choice depends largely on how you phrase the question. Turns out New York's Hunter College Big Apple Poll discovered the same thing, when they asked the same question two different ways and got dramatically different answers. They found that 65 percent of New Yorkers approve of families using school vouchers to "send their children to the school of their choice," whether public, private or parochial. But when asked "Do you favor or oppose allowing

students and parents to choose a private school at public expense?" support drops to only 44 percent. Not surprisingly, 64 percent of those making more than \$100,000 oppose vouchers, while 57 percent of those making less than \$25,000 (who need publicly-supported choice) support them. *

STANDARDS: Massachusetts' two teachers unions have now lined up together in an effort to eliminate the Massachusetts Comprehensive System Assessment (MCAS) as a graduation requirement. Their argument: The exam is difficult and unfair. One of those "unfair" questions asks 10th graders how much an \$18,000 car would be worth after one year if it loses 30 percent of its value the first year. Presumably the Massachusetts Teachers Association believes the student who got his answer by subtracting 30 from 18,000 (and, believe it or not, came up with \$17,990!) should graduate. You can examine these and other examples at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/student/2000/lowscores.html>, and judge for yourself. * **CHARTER SCHOOLS:** Plenty of legislative activity in both Maryland and Indiana, where members of the Education Establishment appear to be lining up behind charter school laws – as long as those laws won't actually lead to the creation of real charter schools. In Maryland, hearings are being held today by the Senate Economic and Environmental Affairs Committee, where the choice is between a weak bill and a weaker bill. CER is testifying at the hearings, and we're suggesting that the legislature take a year to truly study what makes an effective, successful charter law. (Link to [CER Testimony](#).) We're offering our services in sponsoring study trips for the legislators, so they can educate themselves. In Indiana, support from charter schools is coming from diverse corners of the state, like Democratic mayors Bart Peterson, of Indianapolis, and Graham Richard of Fort Wayne, who are looking to have the option to authorize charter schools themselves. And the United Auto Workers, concerned about Indiana's standardized test scores, are urging that the legislature "take a significant step forward" toward establishing charter schools. On the other side, the Indiana School Boards and Superintendent Association support a weak bill that would allow only local school boards as chartering authorities. When asked how many public school districts were interested in actually starting charter schools, they dodged the question by answering: "We support charter school legislation." When asked what they would do differently with charter schools, they responded "More of the same things that we're already doing..." In essence: *Charter School Law, Yes. Charter Schools, No.* See also related articles:

- [MARYLAND CHARTER SCHOOL LAW MAY GET OK](#), by Howard Libit, *Baltimore Sun*, February 18, 2001.
- [LAW WOULD KILL SCHOOL REFORM](#), Indianapolis Business Journal Editorial, February 19-25, 2001.

* **CONTRACTS:** The new education company K12, an Internet-based elementary and secondary school providing online curriculum for families and schools, won approval for its first virtual charter school in Norristown, Pennsylvania. The company, whose chairman is former Education Secretary William J. Bennett, will receive a five-year charter to provide curriculum for and run an Internet-based Pennsylvania Virtual Charter School. For more information, visit <http://www.k12.com>.



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