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CER

IN THE NEWS

Highlights From
The Best Year In Reform News
2012-2013

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A NOTE ABOUT "IN THE NEWS"

FROM JEANNE ALLEN, PRESIDENT

Today's media landscape is changing faster than ever, and parents, activists, teachers, reformers, and students are experiencing these developments firsthand and in real time.

IN THE NEWS 2012-2013 is a glimpse of The Center for Education Reform's (CER) impact on the media, and highlights what the new trends and developments really mean. CER is covered across a wide spectrum of the media having major impact and influence. You can see that we continue to be the leading voice on the must-covered events, topics, and trends in the education reform movement.

Our fast paced society demands immediacy of news. This immediacy can sometimes restrict the accuracy of information and affects the context and framing of the stories. Truthfully, we rely on short snippets of the news throughout the day. There is no doubt that in the 20 years that CER has been around, the tempo of the news has increased – internet, twitter, television, blogosphere, Facebook and other social media offer us hourly or even continuous coverage.

Some say it's not always good to see your name in the news. However, our metrics show that when CER is in the news, the impact we have is overwhelmingly positive.

As an organization, where grassroots is at the core of our existence, this means all news, for the most part, is good news when it mentions CER. Students, parents, and activists need to know what's going on in the education reform movement to become better informed consumers and critics — from social media's influence on events, like the teacher's union strike in Chicago and the 2012 presidential election, to the continued growth of television streaming of events as they happen live, the institution that is the media does not escape our attention.

In total, throughout 2012 and in the first quarter of 2013, CER data and staff were featured in more than 780 newspaper, online, and broadcast news stories earning over 190 million impressions from outlets like *The New York Times*, MSNBC, *Washington Post*, CNN, NBC News and Fox News, to name just a few.

As we head into CER's 3rd decade, we will continue to help inform and change the way the media reports on education reform and as we contribute to transform the narrative to better inform the public, we hope you will follow us too. Check us out and see the work we are doing daily to protect and stimulate media coverage and issue advocacy. And like true media consumers, you can follow us online at www.edreform.com, on Facebook www.facebook.com/theCenterforEducationReform and on Twitter @edreform.

Thank you for your support!

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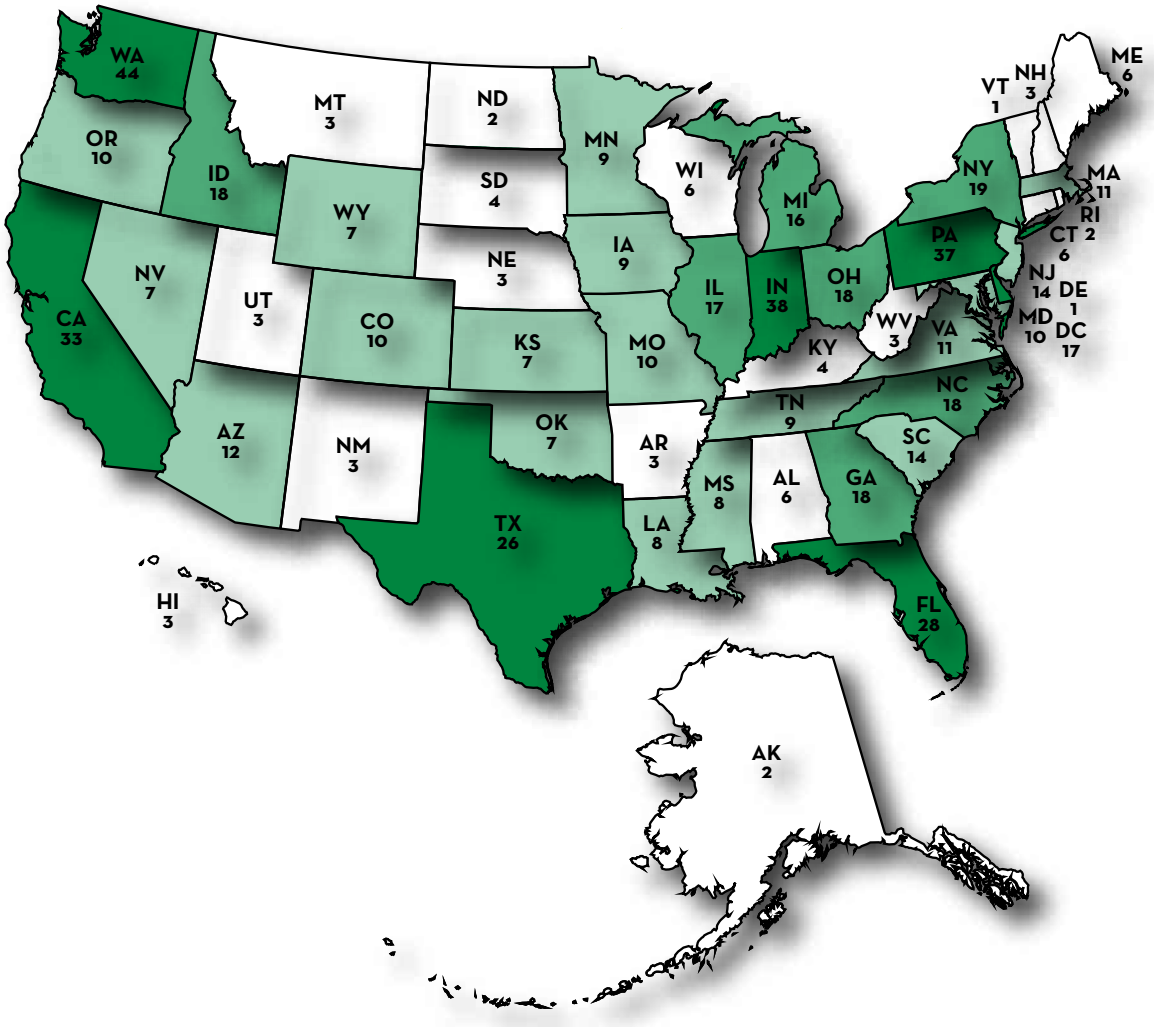
MEDIA IMPACT

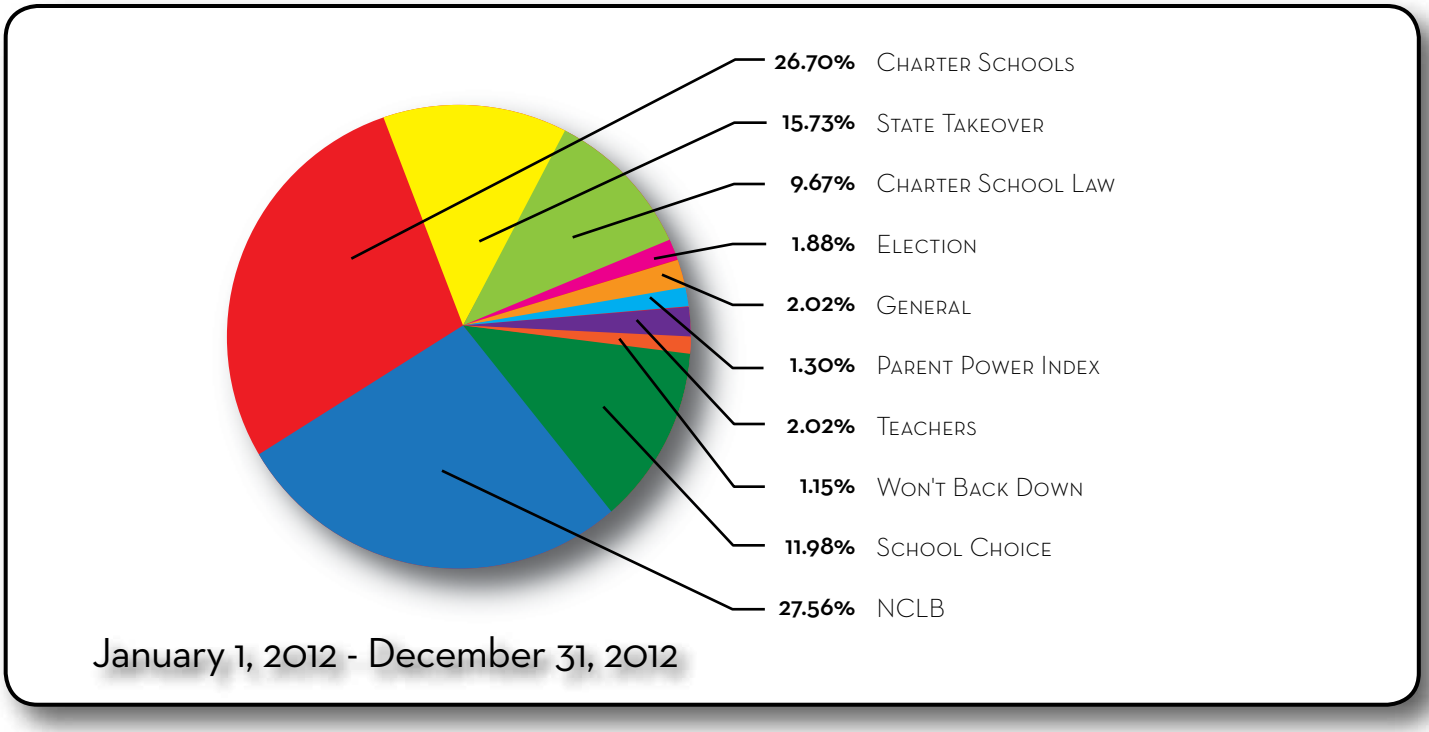
STIMULATING MEDIA COVERAGE



January 1, 2012 - December 31, 2012

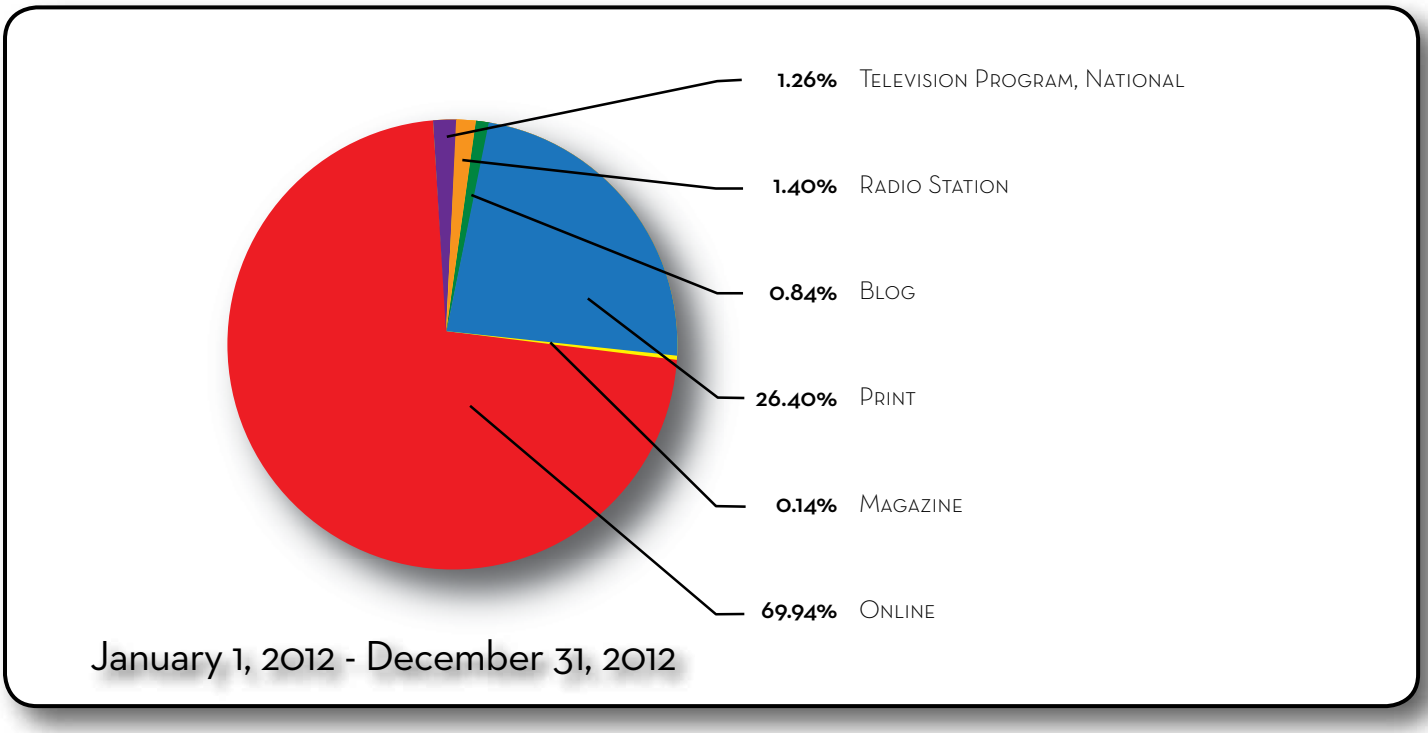
NEWS BY STATE

This map Indicates the states where CER has achieved the most news in 2012.
The darker the state the more news CER achieved in 2012.



NEWS BY CATEGORY

This chart indicates how CER's news is divided by particular search categories in 2012.



NEWS BY MEDIA

This chart indicates what type of media ran CER's message in 2012.

CER IN THE NEWS 2012-2013 AT A GLANCE

OVERALL CUMULATIVE IMPRESSIONS

In 2012 and throughout the first quarter of 2013, CER staff and data were featured in 787 newspaper, online and broadcast news stories earning 190,098,061 impressions.

INCREASED MEDIA POSITIVE COVERAGE

CER raises the positivity rate of articles when we are involved. However, our work in the Media Bullpen (www.mediabullpen.com) and in our general communications arena has produced increasing positive coverage overall since 2010, even furthering the evidence that CER-influenced media is making an impact.

CER-INFLUENCED VS. NON CER-INFLUENCED MEDIA COVERAGE (PRINT & ONLINE)

CER-influenced media resulted in approximately 693 print and online articles in total, of which 86% were positive on education reform issues representing 119,791,001 positive impressions in the media. In the 2,664 education news articles that CER did not influence, only 78% rated positive on reform.

Overall, in 2012, print and online articles mentioning or informed by CER that were positive or neutral resulted in a 195 percent increase from 354 articles in 2011 to 672 in 2012. This increase is due to increased CER-led efforts in our target states, Media Bullpen and EdFifty.com as well as increased online media presence in blogs and online broadcast and print outlets.

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ON AIR

Broadcast Media

TELEVISION

KOCO-TV	2/10/12	Oklahoma City, OK	Charter School Laws and Data
CNN HEADLINE NEWS	2/16/12	National	Teacher Evaluations and Teacher Misconduct
CNN	2/26/12	National	The State of Education Reform
NORTH CAROLINA NEWS NETWORK	4/2/12	North Carolina	Charter school law misses the mark in national ranking
KSTP	4/2/12	Minneapolis, MN	Study: Minn. Charter School Law Among Best in Country
KSFR	4/2/12	Santa Fe, NM	Grade of "C" for New Mexico's charter schools law
WVII ABC7	4/3/12	Bangor, ME	Maine's Charter School Law Gets Passing Grade...Barely
WICS-TV	4/3/12	Springfield, IL	Illinois Charter Law Ranking
NORTHWEST CABLE NEWS NETWORK	4/3/12	Seattle, WA	Charter School Laws and Data
CMU PUBLIC BROADCASTING NETWORK	4/17/12	Mount Pleasant, MI	Charter School Laws and Data
NBC NIGHTLY NEWS	7/27/12	National	School Choice and 2012 Presidential Election
WALL STREET JOURNAL OPINION LIVE	8/29/12	National	Education reform at the 2012 Republican National Convention
FOX NEWS CHANNEL (BRETT BAIER)	9/11/12	National	2012 Presidential Election Education Platforms
FOX & FRIENDS (FOX NEWS CHANNEL)	9/25/12	National	"Wont Back Down" and The Parent Power Index
FOX BUSINESS	12/6/12	National	John Stossel Reports: "The Charter Blob"
FOX 45	1/10/13	Baltimore, MD	MD Schools Rank #1 in Nation

RADIO

MORNING IN AMERICA	3/23/12	National	The State of Education Reform
AMERICAN FAMILY RADIO ASSOCIATION	4/4/12	National	Charter School Laws and Data
TIM BRYANT RADIO	4/5/12	Georgia	Elections, Teacher Quality and Higher Education
KNRS RADIO	9/27/12	Salt Lake City, UT	"Wont Back Down" and The Parent Power Index
A2ZPANDC	1/27/13	Phoenix, AZ	School Choice Week '13, About and Benefits
WJON AM	1/31/13	St. Cloud, MN	Minnesota's Parent Power Index

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GENERATING IDEAS

The Opinion Pages

The Patriot-News

February 13, 2012

Pennsylvania makes it too hard to start charter schools

By JEANNE ALLEN

While the headlines and dates might differ, we keep hearing the same old story. Local school boards statewide, including Harrisburg School District, continue to deny their students quality educational options.

With 91 percent of Harrisburg's traditional public schools failing (10 schools out of 11), a budget that's a complete mess and only one charter school operating and approved during the last decade, it's troubling to keep reading the same story — "Harrisburg School Board rejects charter school applications."

You have to wonder what is wrong with the school board and why it doesn't have the best interests of its students at heart. Are all of these charter school applications really that bad? No. Would they really put greater financial burden on the cash-strapped district? No. They'd save the district money. So then, you might ask, what's really going on here?

Pennsylvania's charter school law is as absurd as the notion of requiring Burger King to seek approval from McDonald's before opening another restaurant. Traditionally, local school boards are often unable or unwilling to have fair and impartial processes to vet charter schools. Many that do approve charter schools create friction with the schooling entities.

This is why the concept of multiple authorizers is an important change needed for the Pennsylvania's charter school law. The term "multiple" or "independent" authorizers is used to describe a component of the charter school law permitting authorizing entities such as universities, new independent state agencies and/or mayors.

In addition, state boards that approve charter schools on appeal might become an authorizer. States that permit a number of entities to authorize charter schools or provide applicants with a binding appeals process encourage more activity than those that vest authorizing power in a single entity, particularly if that entity is the local school board.

The goal is to give parents the most options, and having multiple sponsors helps achieve it. Having multiple authorizers is not a new concept. Presently, 16 states have independent or multiple chartering authorities while several more have been considering and advancing this improvement through their legislatures.

Those states with multiple authorizers on the books are seeing growth of high-quality charter schools that help students excel and achieve academic success not found in many traditional public schools.

Not too long ago, traditional public school scores in New York City looked a lot more like Pennsylvania's dismal record. But over time, the competition from giving parents a choice has improved all schools.

Charter school students in New York City demonstrate a long-term trend of outperforming their peers in traditional public schools, thanks to a strong state charter law that allows for multiple and highly accountable authorizers. In fact, 68.5 percent of the Big Apple's charter students are proficient in math compared with 57.3 percent in traditional public schools.

As it stands, there are only disincentives for local school boards to approve charter schools. And without multiple authorizers, families and students are missing out on the opportunity to explore different and innovative educational options. It's time for lawmakers in the Keystone State to get real about education reform and act on it.

Children's lives are on the line. Every day they stall to get it done is one more day they are failing our future.

Jeanne Allen is president of The Center for Education Reform in Washington, D.C.

THE HUFFINGTON POST

April 12, 2012

Charter Schools and Sausage

By JEANNE ALLEN

Many people know the old adage, often attributed to Churchill, that the two things one best not see being made are law and sausage. Indeed when it comes to education policy there is no better truism.

Twenty-one years ago when the states first began enacting charter school laws, the intention -- and the hope -- was that charter schools would begin to serve the millions of students who had long been stuck in failing schools and who, by all accounts today, are still woefully underserved by the traditional public school establishment. Charter schools -- public schools free from most rules and regulations that hinder progress and success, open by choice and held accountable for academic results, now number almost 5,700 with nearly 2 million children in attendance. That's barely 2% of all public school students today, though in Washington the market share is 45% and in Kansas City it's 35%, a direct correlation between need and demand -- and the strength of the charter school laws in some states. And while some laws indeed have opened the way for the proliferation of charter schools, some states' laws are no more than words on paper.

While most education groups understand that just passing a law is barely half the battle, sadly, the general public is largely unaware that it takes more than an up or down vote to change policy and make good things start happening for kids. And so when parents call us or revolt in their neighborhood over the lack of quality education available to them, many turn a blind eye. Policymakers in particular wonder what all the fuss is about, especially when their state has a charter law. Yes, it's uncanny but true that most lawmakers don't know what really happens in practice after they've helped enact a law! And getting their attention to actually focus on what their handiwork hath wrought is a challenge.

So while the nation's schools are busy grading their students, we're busy grading the states on how well their laws actually work in practice to improve education.

Our measurements are based on consistent, numerical analyses that hold every state to the same standard: Will the actual written law yield high numbers of high quality charter schools, with freedom and flexibility in operations, equity in funding, and accountability in outcomes? Does the sausage making include the best ingredients available, or pure garbage?

We thoroughly review of each state's law, examining what the words actually mean, in practice. For example, the word "commensurate" with regard to funding sounds great, doesn't it? But in practice, it is often interpreted to mean different things depending on who's in charge or how regulations are written. A funding formula that seems as clear as day can actually be a jumble of contradictory statements, understood -- often deliberately -- only by the regulators (and often to a charter school's detriment). Still more often, practices are created and attributed to law that do not have even the slightest relationship to the policies enacted. Someone, somewhere puts in place a practice that gets followed and treated like law over time. It happens every day with charter school laws. Policies are set by someone -- as fallible as we -- perceived or interpreted to be right, and then they have the force of law.

This is a point that should not be lost on our nation's educators, who are often required to do things that school boards and superintendents have interpreted as being required in law, when in actuality the practices they demand are simply a reaction, and their own interpretation of how to respond. That's the pandemic of "teaching to the test"; the idea that a school would be judged or rewarded on the basis of one set of test scores does not in fact happen anywhere, but it's become conventional wisdom and thus common practice to require them to "teach to a test" as opposed to do the "real" teaching they think will get a more substantial learning result. Teachers complain they don't have the flexibility, confidence or resources to do their job well. The reality is that great teaching results in great results on any test, but like making law and sausage, getting there is messy.

Lawmakers often fall into the same trap in their own craft, and resort to creating policies that may sound responsive to the needs and demands of the public but in reality have little impact on the people they are intended to serve. Many states permit charters to open, but their laws are so restrictive and inoperable that they may as well not have laws at all. And because they simply approached charter lawmaking as if they were "teaching to the test" these states yield grades of low C's, Ds and Fs.

On the other hand, those states that seek substance over form, and whose laws truly foster the creation of high numbers of high quality charters get, to no one's surprise, the better grades; the A's and B's. Instead of going through the motions, they challenge conventional wisdom, common practices and succeed in doing what they set out to do when they started.

Educating the public to understand the mysteries of law making is the first step in ensuring a truly exceptional education for all children for generations to come. Education reform requires a lot of moving parts to make good schools grow for all children. Be it increased and better standards, teacher quality initiatives, new forms of accountability or charter school laws, we must be resolute in our demand for laws that actually do what they intend and ensure that long after the people now in charge are gone, the intended results are still happening.

Jeanne Allen is president of The Center for Education Reform in Washington, D.C.

NASHVILLE
P ◆ R ◆ I ◆ D ◆ E
September 21, 2012

Parents vs. the Blob

by Jeanne Allen, President, Center for Education Reform

A parent revolution is underway, and most Americans don't have a clue it's happening. That's because most of us (concerned as we are about the environment, jobs and our own family's sustainability) think education is someone else's responsibility. And the self-perceived 'owners' of the traditional education system, i.e., The Blob, stand in the way of virtually all meaningful education reform and work hard to give you the sense that everything is under control.

But reality has a way of intruding. Parents are waking up to the disturbing reality that they have no influence over where and how their children are educated. With eyes increasingly opened, they seek out others who have similar epiphanies and band together to change things. And then, like something out of a bad movie (cue creepy music) The Blob kicks into gear. The moment these parents gain any traction for real change, they find information that confirms they are not alone and they are off. Then they are immediately maligned by phony Blob front groups portraying themselves as parent-friendly.

Case in point: As I was sitting at home on a recent Friday night, bracing myself for the week ahead when I'd be dropping my two youngest at college, I decided to tweet my pleasure over Teachers Rock, a solid hour on prime time TV whose star studded cast paid tribute to rank and file teachers. Such teachers move mountains for children and defy the status quo, often at great personal cost. This is illustrated by the upcoming feature film Won't Back Down, which chronicles the efforts of a parent and teacher to transform their failing school. As it was advertised during the show, parent groups began praising what they saw, only to be attacked, as I was, for applauding what they watched. "Shame on you for supporting a movie that sensationalizes locking kids in dark closets as ubiquitous 'punishment,'" bellowed someone named Colum Whyte, just one of hundreds of venomous tweets I began to witness. (An earlier version of this op-ed attributed the previous quote to Stephanie Rivera who was part of the Twitter assaults on parent trigger that night but it was not her tweet.) "A ploy against teachers and public education," said another. By nights end there's were more than 100 tweets attacking us, with childish name-calling to boot. These Twitter bullies are typical of what happens when the status quo feels threatened. They seek and lash out at anyone who posits things could be better, who espouses parental choice, or who suggests that the unions and The Blob might be standing in the way of real reform.

To be continued...

(Jeanne Allen is president of the Center for Education Reform, which has been the leading voice and advocate for lasting, substantive and structural education reform in the U.S. since 1993. CER will release a Parent Power Index this fall as part of its Taking America Back to School on Education Reform campaign.)

Los Angeles Times

October 12, 2012

Experts' views about Obama and Romney on education

By HOWARD BLUME

The following are edited excerpts from telephone interviews and email exchanges with leading education analysts, writers and researchers regarding the policies and positions of the presidential candidates.

Michelle Rhee

Chief executive, StudentsFirst; former chancellor, District of Columbia Public Schools

Both support expanding educational options for families. President Obama did this, for example, by encouraging states to get rid of unnecessary caps on public charter schools through Race to the Top [grants]. At the same time, Gov. Romney supports dramatically expanding choices parents can make about where to send their kids to school. But he doesn't tie that increased flexibility to strong rules ensuring any school — private or public — that takes the public funds will be held accountable for student learning.

Jonathan Kozol

Author whose books about education include "Death at an Early Age" (1967) and "Savage Inequalities" (1991). His new book is "Fire in the Ashes."

As we saw in Wisconsin, there is a constituency out there that would like to do away with public-sector unions. The teachers are the loudest of those unions. Romney could not do away with teachers unions, but I think he will do his very best to move us in that direction.

President Obama simply wants to challenge the teachers unions to be more flexible in their demands but obviously recognizes they have a useful role in our society.

I regret the President's apparent willingness to continue relying on standardized exams in evaluating teachers because I think it's a simplistic way of judging what happens in the classroom and excludes so many aspects of a good education that are not reduceable to numbers.

The President recognizes that a demoralized teaching force is not going to bring passionate determination to the education of children — no matter how you measure them, castigate them or properly criticize them.

Jeanne Allen

President, Center for Education Reform, based in Washington, D.C.

A Romney administration would likely leave the regulating to the states, where it belongs. This becomes the huge distinction between the candidates—on charters, on teacher issues, on testing. Obama believes government should lead, and if the states aren't doing something he'll step in.

Romney's impact would be felt much bigger and broader than the current administration's impact. Today you can get more money by promising to behave. Romney's approach would likely be very different: his incentives for choice...; his fight with labor; his attempt to reopen the higher education lending market.

Obama should be calling the unions to the carpet, and instead [Education Secretary Arne] Duncan is sending platitudes about getting along and collaborating. That's because they promised the unions they would work with them and need the unions. Romney has no such allegiance.

Gary Orfield

Professor, UCLA Graduate School of Education; co-director, the Civil Rights Project at UCLA

The Obama administration should have fought harder to continue the economic stimulus in education for at least another year or two. Without it things in schools and colleges would have been far worse.

My reading is that Romney is profoundly skeptical about the value of federal funds and thinks they do no good.

A Romney administration would obviously bring deep cutbacks in virtually all areas of domestic spending.

The Chicago teachers strike is a reflection of the fact that teachers have been pushed too far for too long and are particularly incensed on the overly assertive (and intellectually indefensible) use of test scores to evaluate individual teachers. Romney's very hostile reaction toward the teachers and the Obama Administration's straddle show the difference.

Diane Ravitch

Education historian and blogger whose books include "Death and Life of the Great American School System" (2010).

Both support charters, which is privatization, and which do not get better test scores than public schools.

Both support test-based evaluation of teachers, which has never been shown to accomplish anything other than to demoralize teachers.

Both support carrots (merit pay) and sticks (closing schools like shoe stores that don't make a profit). Merit pay has been tried again and again for nearly a century. It never works.

Both emphasize test scores as the measure of good education, which they are not.

Neither talks about the impact that poverty has on children's readiness to learn.

Three big differences:

1. Romney supports vouchers; Obama does not.

2. Romney embraces privatization; Obama has offered only half-hearted support via privately managed charters.

3. Romney wants to give the student loans back to the banks and provide no help for college students drowning in debt. Obama took the program away from the banks and understands that students need financial aid. All the talk about boosting college-going rates is hollow, if students can't pay for it.

The Detroit News

January 22, 2013

Don't miss the chance to give kids a brighter future

BY SANDY SMITH

They're grown up before you know it. Moms everywhere understand how it can feel like just yesterday that we brought our kids home from the hospital; then before we realize it, they're going off to school, taking driver's training and looking at colleges. As a mother myself, I marvel with each New Year at how quickly the time flies as our children age, learn, mature and grow into exceptional people.

National School Choice Week is next week — a great time to reflect on how blessed our family has been by the tremendous teachers and educators who have taken our kids under their wings and provided them with the sort of quality education they are going to need to succeed throughout their lives. Our family has been fortunate enough to have the opportunity to choose to enroll our children in the Michigan Virtual Charter Academy, one of Michigan's great charter public schools that specializes in a learning style that enables our kids to thrive. Each of our children has one chance at childhood and one chance at an education that will prepare them to take on the world. There's little wonder why parents continue to clamor for these kinds of choices. And according to a new study from one of the nation's most prestigious education research organizations, having choices in our children's education really pays off.

Earlier this month, Stanford University's widely respected Center for Research on Education Outcomes published a study analyzing the difference charter public schools are making for kids in communities across the nation. It found that here in Michigan, students enrolled in charter public schools are performing remarkably better than in traditional public schools and getting significantly more out of each and every school year. According to the study, 35 percent of Michigan charters show better learning gains in reading for their students than the traditional school district in which the charter is located. Only 2 percent of charters show lower learning gains. Even more impressive — 42 percent of Michigan charters perform better than their traditional counterparts in math, while only 6 percent perform at a lower level.

According to researchers at Stanford, these remarkable results translate into the average charter school student receiving the equivalent of two more months of learning each year in reading and math than his or her district school peer. And charter schools in Detroit so dramatically outperform the Detroit Public Schools that the typical charter student in Detroitgains nearly three months achievement for each year he or she attends a charter school.

These aren't just numbers. They are kids — like yours and mine — growing up right before their parents' eyes. The director of Stanford's research center credits these astounding results in large part to the policies, practices and opportunities that Michigan lawmakers have put in place to empower parentswith quality educational choices. In fact, the Center for Education Reform released their annual state-by-state report card on school choice this month, and Michigan was one of only four states in the nation to get an "A."

Our children will be grown before we know it. Let's keep our eyes on the future and continue to embrace choices for parents that mean brighter futures for Michigan kids.

Sandy Smith is a board member of the Michigan Chapter of Public School Options.

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NATIONAL SCENE

National News

Associated Press

January 10, 2012

Washington Lawmakers To Propose Charter Schools Bill

by DONNA GORDON BLANKINSHIP

Several Washington lawmakers plan to introduce a bill later this week that would allow for public charter schools in the state.

Sen. Rodney Tom, D-Medina, said charter schools have proven to be effective in nearly every other state. In many cases, a stampede of parents have tried to get their kids into charter schools, he said.

"That should be the attitude we have at every school," Tom said. "Why would you want to prevent schools that people are clamoring in other states to get into."

Washington voters have twice rejected the idea of charter schools.

Sixty-four percent of Washington voters voted against an initiative to the Legislature calling for charter schools in 1996. Over the next seven years, five charter bills were proposed and then rejected by the Legislature. Then in 2004, a charter bill narrowly passed the Legislature and was signed by the governor, but that November voters rejected the idea again.

Washington is one of eight states that do not allow charter schools, according to the Center for Education Reform. The other states without charter school laws are Alabama, Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and West Virginia.

Maine passed a charter school law in 2011 and the issue has been back on the agenda in many of these other states, including bills introduced but not passed in four, while some of the 42 states with charter school laws have voted to expand their use, according to the Center for Education Reform.

Now that most other states are successfully using these alternative public schools to raise student achievement, Tom says it should be a safe topic for Washington again. He said he expected a bill to be introduced on Thursday.

Last fall, the Washington PTA also added charter schools to its legislative agenda. Other groups support the idea, but the state's largest teachers union says now isn't a good time to talk about putting public money into experimental schools.

The New York Times

January 11, 2012

New York City Charter School Finds That a Grade of 'C' Means Closing

By ANNA M. PHILLIPS

For the first time, New York City is closing a charter school for the offense of simply being mediocre.

The announcement this week that the city planned to shut Peninsula Preparatory Charter School, a seven-year-old elementary school in Far Rockaway, Queens, was unusual by any definition. Since 2004, the city has closed only a few of its 142 charters that have opened — schools that are publicly financed but privately managed, and are a source of competition for traditional schools.

But as more of the city's charter schools have matured, reaching the five-year renewal mark, the Education Department has become increasingly impatient with weak-performing ones. With the closing of Peninsula Prep, which had received a grade of C on each of its last four progress reports, Chancellor Dennis M. Walcott seemed to be signaling that the city's 136 charters will now be held to a higher standard.

And increasing scrutiny of New York charter schools could have widespread implications, prompting a wider conversation across the country about what the bar for closing should be, and how much charter schools should be expected to outperform public schools.

Under Joel I. Klein, the former schools chancellor, the perception had grown among charter school leaders and those on the outside that as long as their test scores were middling at worst and their schools were functional, the city would not interfere.

"I think that there was a large number of people, including the chancellor, who were just very predisposed to be charter supporters, so it was hard for them to take off that hat," said Michael Duffy, a former director of the city's charter school office, who remembered having to lobby his superiors in 2010 to close a charter school in East New York, Brooklyn, that was forcing out special education students.

Marc Sternberg, a deputy chancellor who oversees the charter school office, said the city had not changed its approach to monitoring charter schools.

"Our focus has always been on opening new, excellent district and charter schools that provide students with a high-quality education," he said in a statement. "In 2009, Peninsula Prep received a short-term renewal and were told that if they failed to meet the standards in their charter they would not be given another. They failed to do so, and we have to hold them accountable for that."

But charter school advocates and leaders believe that by closing Peninsula Prep, the city is issuing a warning to schools that it is no longer sufficient to be as good as or slightly better than traditional public schools; they have to be exemplars.

Until now, the city's rate of closing for charters — about 4 percent since the first charters were granted in 1999 — was below the national average: 15 percent of charters across the country have been closed since 1992, according to a report by the Center for Education Reform, published last December.

By the city's standards, Peninsula was not the worst charter school, nor was it the best. Last year, 46 percent of Peninsula's students passed the state English exam, a better performance than 47 other city charters. On the math exam, 60 percent of its students scored as proficient. For the last four years, it received C's on its annual progress reports. It was, by definition, in the middle of the herd. But not on Far Rockaway, where those scores were high enough for Peninsula Prep to outperform 9 of the 10 elementary schools its students are zoned for.

Ericka Wala, Peninsula's principal since July 2009, said the school had been improving, though slowly.

"We were a struggling school in 2009 when everybody was A's and B's," Ms. Wala said, "and when they raised the standard, we were able to maintain a C. The scores had to have gone up in order to do that. I do feel the school is being used as a warning."

New York City has closed charter schools for poor performance in the past, but their test scores were dismal. In other cases, schools were closed after they had already been damaged by poor fiscal or management decisions. Last year, the city succeeded in closing the Ross Global Academy, a charter school led by Courtney Sale Ross, the multimillionaire widow of Steve Ross, the Time Warner chief executive. When the city announced plans to close the school, only 26 percent of its students had passed the state English test and 33 percent passed math.

James Merriman, chief executive of the New York City Charter School Center, said a confluence of factors might have led the city to raise the bar for renewing charter schools. In 2010, state education officials toughened the math and English exams administered annually to students in third through eighth grades, after years of complaints about test score inflation. Across the city, scores dropped precipitously, and suddenly schools that once appeared to be holding their own were actually found to be in distress.

Another factor is that as more charter schools reach their five-year renewal points, the city is judging them by their progress report grades, which were not given to schools opened and renewed before the reports began in 2008. The additional measurement affected Peninsula Prep, which failed to meet five of nine standards it had promised to reach, according to the city's renewal report. One of the standards was receiving at least a B on its progress report.

Charter school advocates said the Education Department had also become responsive to criticism that it treated charter schools differently from district schools. Since 2002, the city has closed 117 district schools, a vast majority of them for poor performance.

"School closure is built into the charter idea — and needs to happen regardless," Mr. Merriman wrote in an e-mail. "But certainly if a district is closing traditional schools for poor performance, not closing charter schools becomes doubly indefensible."

On the other hand, he said charter school critics and the teachers' union had been too quick to urge the city to close charter schools, while defending failing district schools.

TIME

January 31, 2012

What Happens to the Kids When Charter Schools Fail?

By SARAH BUTRYMOWICZ

Terri Griffin made herself a promise when her youngest daughter was ready for kindergarten: the little girl would never set foot in an Akron public school. Griffin, a jewelry-store clerk and graduate of the Ohio city's school system, had sent eight children — two of her own and six others she raised as her own — to traditional public schools.

She felt they were pushed through to a diploma and didn't learn enough. Teachers were eager to recommend special education, but Griffin couldn't get them to provide other, basic help. So for her youngest daughter, she sought out a charter school, Lighthouse Academy, and hoped for a better outcome.

Griffin didn't know about Lighthouse Academy's low test scores or that it had been identified by the state as being in an academic emergency on and off since opening in 2000. Instead, when she visited the west Akron school, Griffin saw caring teachers working with small classes in a school that was well established in the community. She hasn't once regretted her decision. Now, under Ohio's charter school closure law, considered the toughest in the nation, Lighthouse Academy is slated to be shuttered at the end of the year. The 2006 law mandates that any charter school that has received the state's Academic Emergency rating or been placed on academic watch for two out of three years will be shut down. (The ratings are based on state test scores.)

Most of Lighthouse's 66 students will be thrust back into the same public schools their parents tried to flee. Nearby public schools perform only slightly better than Lighthouse on standardized tests, and some do just as poorly.

The closure is another blow for the children of this fading industrial city, where a third of all kids live in poverty and about a quarter of high schoolers fail to graduate. It's a scenario becoming familiar to thousands of families in the nation's poorest neighborhoods as more and more districts start cracking down on low-performing charter schools, which get public funds but operate without the usual bureaucratic constraints.

The dismantling of so many charters has some experts worrying that when students are forced to leave educational environments where they have friends and feel comfortable, the disruption is destabilizing and upsetting to some of the system's most vulnerable populations. Robert Slavin, director of the Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University in Maryland, believes closure should be a last resort, after giving schools support and experimenting with possible solutions. Otherwise, well-meaning educational programs could wind up hurting the very kids they are trying to help. "Letting alone or closing are not the only two options," Slavin says. "[Closing] is very damaging to kids."

Nonetheless, the crackdown on ineffective charter schools has the backing of charter supporters as well as critics. In an effort to save the charter movement, which has come under increasing scrutiny, advocates have asked for more accountability, supporting forced closures of low-performing schools. Florida has already adopted a law similar to Ohio's. During the current legislative session, charter advocates in Missouri are pushing a bill that would require charter schools to set up specific benchmarks, giving sponsors an easy way to hold schools accountable. The California Charter Schools Association has said it will start urging school boards to not allow faltering schools to stay open.

Bill Sims, president of the Ohio Alliance of Public Charter Schools, says he regularly gets calls from his counterparts in other states asking for more information on Ohio's law so they can use it as a model for their own legislation.

"The good news is, Ohio doesn't keep underperforming schools open. The bad news is, it hit Lighthouse," says Marianne Cooper, director of the Richland Academy of the Arts, the nonprofit community arts center in Mansfield, Ohio, that sponsors Lighthouse. While the organization has closed the four other charters it operated, it saw potential in Lighthouse because of some of the same things that attracted and impressed Griffin.

"I love the way the classes are structured," Griffin says of her now second-grader's experience. "The teachers that she has had take those children in as their own."

The personal attention has not translated into convincing data, however. Lighthouse has struggled on state tests since it opened, falling well below state and district averages. Over the past six years, only about 31% of its students annually have reached proficiency across all grades and subjects. In some cases, only one student per class passed the exam.

Last year, every student demonstrated at least one year's worth of growth, according to state standardized tests, although many remained below grade level in their performance.

Using that growth as a key argument, Principal Fannie Brown plans to appeal the closure decision. However, the Ohio Department of Education says the decision will not be overturned.

"While the school made some academic gains in the last report-card period, it was simply not enough to surmount the consequences of the closure law," says Ohio Education Department spokesman Patrick Gallaway.

If Lighthouse closes, as expected, it could represent the beginning of a major change in the way charter schools operate. Nationally, charter schools with low scores are only slightly more likely to close than traditional schools with low scores, according to a recent study by the Fordham Institute that examined charters in 10 states. New data released by the Center for Education Reform (CER), a pro-charter group, indicates that 15% of charter schools have been shut down over the course of the charter movement, which began two decades ago. But fewer than 200 of the 6,700 charters that have opened since 1992 were closed down for academic reasons; the majority were shuttered due to financial or mismanagement problems.

Jeanne Allen, CER's president, says administrative problems indicate that a school isn't working long before test scores come out; the center's data, she says, shows that failing schools do get shut down even without the new regulations. "The vast majority succeed [and] stay open," she says. "Those that don't are closed within a few short years before they can ever have any negative impact on students."

AP Associated Press

February 10, 2012

Leaving 'No Child' law: Obama lets 10 states flee

By BEN FELLER AND KIMBERLY HEFLING

WASHINGTON — It could be the beginning of the end for No Child Left Behind.

The goal was lofty: Get all children up to par in math and reading by 2014. But the nation isn't getting there, and now some states are getting out.

In a sign of what's to come, President Barack Obama on Thursday freed 10 states from some of the landmark law's toughest requirements. Those states, which had to commit to their own, federally approved plans, will now be free, for example, to judge students with methods other than test scores. They also will be able to factor in subjects beyond reading and math.

"We can combine greater freedom with greater accountability," Obama said from the White House. Plenty more states are bound to take him up on the offer.

While many educators and many governors celebrated, congressional Republicans accused Obama of executive overreach, and education and civil rights groups questioned if schools would be getting a pass on aggressively helping poor and minority children — the kids the 2002 law was primarily designed to help.

The first 10 states to be declared free from the education law are Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, Oklahoma and Tennessee. The only state that applied for the flexibility and did not get it, New Mexico, is working with the administration to get approval.

Twenty-eight other states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico have signaled that they, too, plan to flee the law in favor of their own plans.

The government's action on Thursday was a tacit acknowledgement that the law's main goal, getting all students up to speed in reading and math by 2014, is not within reach.

The states excused from following the law no longer have to meet that deadline. Instead, they had to put forward plans showing they will prepare children for college and careers, set new targets for improving achievement among all students, reward the best performing schools and focus help on the ones doing the worst.

Obama said he was acting because Congress had failed to update the law despite widespread agreement it needed to be fixed.

"We've offered every state the same deal," Obama said. "If you're willing to set higher, more honest standards than the ones that were set by No Child Left Behind, then we're going to give you the flexibility to meet those standards."

The executive action by Obama is one of his most prominent in an ongoing campaign to act on his own where Congress is rebuffing him.

No Child Left Behind was one of President George W. Bush's most touted domestic accomplishments, and was passed with widespread bipartisan support in Congress. It has been up for renewal since 2007. But lawmakers have been stymied for years by competing priorities, disagreements over how much of a federal role there should be in schools and, in the recent Congress, partisan gridlock.

The law requires annual testing, and districts were forced to keep a closer eye on how students of all races were performing — not just relying on collective averages. Schools that didn't meet requirements for two years or longer faced increasingly harsher consequences, including busing children to higher-performing schools, offering tutoring and replacing staff.

Over the years, the law became increasingly unpopular, itself blamed for many ills in schools. Teachers and parents complained it led to "teaching to the test." Parents didn't like the stigma of sending their kids to a school labeled a failure when requirements weren't met. States, districts and schools said the law was too rigid and that they could do a better job coming up with strategies to turn around poor performance.

A common complaint was that the 2014 deadline was simply unrealistic.

As the deadline approaches, more schools are failing to meet requirements under the law, with nearly half not doing so last year, according to the Center on Education Policy. Center officials said that's because some states today have harder tests or have high numbers of immigrant and low-income children, but it's also because the law requires states to raise the bar each year for how many children must pass.

The current law requires schools to use standardized tests in math and reading to determine student progress. The waivers announced Thursday do not excuse states from those requirements but instead give them the freedom to use science, social studies and other subjects in their measures of student progress.

The 10 states also now can include scores on college admission exams and other tests in their calculation of how schools are performing. They can be excused from penalties included in the federal law but had to come up with their own set of sanctions for low-performing schools.

For example, Georgia will replace the law's pass-or-fail with a five-star rating system and will use end-of-course tests and Advanced Placement performance in its measure of students.

In Oklahoma, schools are to be taken over by the state if they consistently fail to meet standards.

Kentucky — the first state to formally ask the federal government to be excused from some requirements when Gov. Steve Beshear sent a letter to Washington last summer — will use ACT college-entrance exams and other assessments by that company in its measures.

The schools still have to focus on the subgroups of students outlined in the federal law, such as English language learners and students with disabilities.

Not everyone applauded Thursday's announcement.

While No Child Left Behind isn't perfect, said Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform, it's thrown a valuable spotlight on problem schools. She said giving districts and states more flexibility "without firm consequence" is not reform.

"If school district power were the answer to our education woes, our nation would be soaring high above the rest of the world in achievement. It is not, and it will not, until our leaders — just as the people they serve — face both rewards and sanctions for the education systems they govern," Allen said.

examiner.com

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Center for Education Reform's report tallies a national average of 2.1

By FLORENCE AND JOSEPH MCGINN

The Center for Education Reform's newly released report, The Essential Guide to Charter School Law: Charter School Laws Across the States, 2012, is the center's 13th annual analysis of charter school-related legal policy and issues. The report documents current conditions for effective laws able to support the growth and success of models of public, charter schooling. The Charter School Laws Across the States report indicates the wide variations in charter school laws, state by state, average out to a national 2.1 GPA grade on charter school policy, revealing a compelling need for improvement, especially in failing states.

District of Columbia and 29 states earn A, B, and C scores

The national GPA of 2.1, essentially a C grade on state charter school laws, is a result of analysis of 41 states and the District of Columbia. The final, national tally combines state-earned scores of five A grades, nine B grades, seventeen C grades, and a dismal seven D grades and four F grades.

Five states received a grade of A in the Center for Education Reform's Charter School Laws Across the States, 2012, report:

District of Columbia
Minnesota
Indiana
Arizona
Michigan

Ten states received a grade of B in the CER report on charter school laws:

New York
California
Florida
Colorado
Utah
Missouri
Idaho
Pennsylvania
Louisiana
Ohio

Fifteen states received a grade of B in the CER report on charter school laws:

Wisconsin
South Carolina
Delaware
Massachusetts
Georgia
Tennessee
New Mexico
Oregon
New Jersey
Nevada
Oklahoma
Maine
Texas
North Carolina
Illinois

Twelve states receive deficient and failing scores

The states receiving a grade of D were Arkansas, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Wyoming, Alaska, Maryland, and Hawaii. Failing states were Kansas, Iowa, Virginia, and Mississippi.

Analysis made against national benchmarks

The Center for Education Reform's 2012 report analyzes each law against nationally recognized benchmarks that most closely dictate the impact of charter school policies on healthy, sustainable charter schools. Categories ranked in the 2012 Center for Education Reform report include:

• the existence of multiple independent authorizers
• number of schools allowed
• operational autonomy
• fiscal equity when compared to their conventional public school peers.

Components such as the creation of multiple independent authorizers and fiscal equity can transform a state's educational culture. Lack of components to ensure operational freedom, equity and alternate paths to authorizing limit charter progress can lead to contentious charter battles.

Charter schools are essential part of national strategy

US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has stated, "High-quality charter schools have an important role to play in the overall strategy of successful school reform." When charters perform well, US Secretary of Education Duncan has indicated that "high-quality charter schools across the country are making an amazing difference in our children's lives, especially when charters in inner-city communities are performing as well, if not better, than their counterparts in much wealthier suburbs." He has noted their pivotal importance and success, especially in serving a "vulnerable student population that is majority low-income" with capacities that "exceed the average academic performance for all students in their state."

Reform progress is not even

The Center for Education Reform's President Jeanne Allen states, "Charter schools...are permitted in 41 states and the District of Columbia... While some state laws are still as great as intended when they were created, many states, just like schools that complain they are forced to 'teach to the test' rather than deliver exceptional education."

Allen continues, "This should be a wake up call to everyone... Just having a law is not even half the battle. Knowing how to understand a law and implement it is the most essential act anyone engaged in lawmaking will ever undertake, and this report is for and about the hundreds of local, state and national policymakers whose pens and keyboards create the laws that can transform — or erect barriers to — true educational progress for all children."

Debate continues

It should be stated that other evaluations, based upon different methodologies and models exist, including work done by strong agencies such as the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. The Center for Educational Reform states in the introduction of its Charter School Laws Across the States, 2012, report that it recognizes the work of other agencies and invites debates and discourse on its scorecard and analysis.

Success is essential

It should not be surprising that not all models succeed, but despite obstacles, the path of milestones met, continuous evaluation, and ongoing improvement remains critical.

The Inquirer

June 12, 2012

Philadelphia Schools Enveloped In Anger, Frustration Amid Austere Budget

By KATHY MATHESON

PHILADELPHIA -- The school system's chief recovery officer was trying to explain how broke the district is, but no one could hear him.

"Save our schools! Save our schools!"

More than 200 protesters had packed the Philadelphia school board meeting and were drowning out the official presentation; they also waved signs expressing "No confidence" in next year's austere budget. It was the second major demonstration at district headquarters in just over a week.

The City of Brotherly Love is boiling over with frustration. It's not just the $700 million in education cuts this past year. It's not just a loss of state aid, which led to a massive rally and 14 arrests. And it's not just the plan to close 40 of Philadelphia's 249 schools within a year.

"For 10 years we've lived with promises that privatization and choice options would be the magic bullet to a lot of the problems," said parent Helen Gym. "What we found is chasing after these silver bullets has really drained schools of resources and starved them to the point of dysfunction."

Like many other cash-strapped urban districts, Philadelphia is trying desperately to emerge from a quagmire of red ink and underachievement. A state takeover in 2002 did little to eradicate the financial, academic and violence problems that have plagued the schools for years.

Philadelphia badly lags the national average in reading and math scores, ranking below even peer districts like New York, Houston and Miami. About 61 percent of local students graduate from high school; only 35 percent get a college degree.

Now, a new cadre of district leaders is determined to develop a fiscally sustainable system of safe, high-quality schools for the city's 146,000 students. Chief Recovery Officer Thomas Knudsen has proposed cutting hundreds of central office jobs, creating management networks to oversee schools, and shuttering dozens of old and depopulated buildings as more students enroll in charter schools.

The response was swift – and angry.

Parents and teachers contend they had no input into such a drastic overhaul. Students and community members fear school closures will destroy neighborhoods and create blight. Public education advocates say the district is privatizing a basic civil right.

Chicago, Detroit, Kansas City and St. Louis also turned to the private sector in ultimately failed efforts to improve schools, said Diane Ravitch, an education professor at New York University. There's no evidence it will succeed in Philadelphia, she said.

In fact, the city did try a similar approach 10 years ago, doling out 70 schools to education management organizations. But labor contracts largely prevented the companies from hiring their own staff; few improvements were seen; and nearly all have left the district.

"Why are we trying this again?" Cathy Roccia-Meier, a visibly frustrated parent, said at a budget hearing last month.

West Philadelphia High School sophomore Alycia Duncan worries that school closures could place students from rival neighborhoods in the same building – with violent results. As it is, she said, troubled students have no one to talk to because of a dearth of counselors.

"They don't really know from a student's perspective what's really going on," Duncan, 15, said of district officials.

Some education reformers have praised aspects of Knudsen's plan, saying that decentralization will allow teachers and principals more autonomy. Jeanne Allen, president of the Washington-based Center for Education Reform, described the proposal as long overdue and perhaps not bold enough.

"This should be a reinvention of how kids enroll, how we hire people to serve them, how we serve the community in general," Allen said.

Still, school commissioners heard boos and catcalls at a May 31 meeting as they approved the first step in the overhaul: A pared-down, $2.5 billion budget that even Chief Academic Officer Penny Nixon described as "bare bones" and "not adequate for the children that we serve."

"We still do not have enough nurses, counselors, librarians, arts and music programs, sports, and support staff," Nixon said.

Nurses, in fact, have picketed weekly outside district offices since nearly 50 were laid off in December. They say the cuts endanger students, whose medications are now often dispensed by staff with no medical training.

District leaders stress the overhaul proposal is still being refined. At the meeting, they tried to tell the raucous crowd that students are suffering for the financial sins of previous administrators, as well as cuts in aid, rising costs and a weak economy.

But it was hard to hear their defense above the chanting.

"They say cut back, we say fight back! They say cut back, we say fight back!"

The passion in the room left Gym, perhaps the district's most outspoken activist, at an uncharacteristic loss for words as she stood to address the commissioners. Her voice faltered briefly before launching into the eloquent and hard-charging criticism for which she is known.

Afterward, Gym said she was overcome by the emotion overflowing from the broad coalition of students, parents, teachers, district staff, clergy, union leaders and residents.

"It's a real last stand around public education," Gym said. "And to have all these people come out ... was, I thought, just incredibly powerful."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

August 2, 2012

Michigan City Outsources All of Its Schools

Highland Park Turns Over Troubled Operations to For-Profit Charter Firm

By STEPHANIE BANCHERO And MATTHEW DOLAN

HIGHLAND PARK, Mich.—The public school district in this hard-luck city has come up with a radical answer for its troubled education system: It is outsourcing all of it.

Highland Park School District, one of the state's lowest-performing academically, says it will turn over its three schools and nearly 1,000 students to a private, for-profit charter school company—the second district in Michigan to take such a drastic step to avert financial collapse.

The abrupt news last week sparked concern—and in some cases, relief— from parents and other residents who packed a Wednesday night meeting in the faded industrial city, which is nearly surrounded by Detroit.

The parents came to hear from the charter company, Leona Group LLC, which promises to improve the learning environment and boost student performance in a district where only 22% of third graders passed state reading exams last school year and just 10% passed math. The results were even worse for high-schoolers: About 10% were proficient in reading, and none in math.

"I have a lot of questions, but I'm hopeful that it will turn out for the best," Cynthia Gresham, a school volunteer and parent of an incoming senior at Highland Park Community High School, said at the meeting.

Districts nationwide are trying radical approaches to shake up financially and academically troubled schools, including dismissing the entire staff or turning several schools over to outside groups to run.

A few districts in Georgia have converted into charter districts in an effort to get out from under state class-size and teacher-salary schedules. In those cases, the district administration generally remains in place and oversees schools, but each school creates a council of teachers and parents that make hiring and budget decisions. New Orleans has taken one of the most extreme approaches by converting most of its schools to charters and allowing students to use state-funded vouchers to attend private schools.

Charter schools—public schools run by outside entities using taxpayer funds—are free from many administrative constraints, including union contracts, and typically spend less than traditional schools per student.

Proponents say the move could offer a lifeline to other school districts in crisis. In 2011, 48 of Michigan's 793 districts ran deficits that totaled $429 million, compared with 18 districts with $59 million in combined deficits in 2004-2005, according to the most recent state data.

"This could be the new model for public education," said Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform, a national research and advocacy group that supports school choice. "It stands to be a lab of innovation where people can see that thinking outside the box is not so scary."

But opponents say the plan is designed to kill off unions and lacks the public's input. "Where's the accountability to the community?" asked Katrina Henry, president of American Federation of Teachers union Local 684, which represents the district's teachers.

Highland Park decided to privatize its schools after years of enrollment decline, poor fiscal stewardship and allegations that a board member stole more than $125,000 by submitting false invoices; the charges against the member are pending.

During the 2010-2011 school year, the district spent $16,508 per student. By comparison, Michigan districts on average spent $9,202 per pupil that year. In the process, Highland Park ran up an $11.3 million deficit over its $18.9 million school budget.

The district got itself into financial trouble, in part, because it didn't cut staff as fast as its enrollment declined along with the city's population, leaving it with higher per-pupil expenditures, said Joyce Parker, who, under a controversial state law, was appointed district emergency manager in May by Republican Gov. Rick Snyder.

"The financial problems were immense and we had to look at nontraditional ways to get the district back on track," said Ms. Parker, who has full control of the district and made the decision to convert to a charter after ruling out a merger with a neighboring district.

Under the plan, the district will be hived off into an education arm with a separate, three-member board appointed by Ms. Parker to oversee the contract with Leona Group, the charter-school company.

The district will remain as an entity run by Ms. Parker to pay off its debt of about $5 million, using local property taxes that currently go to run the schools.

Phoenix-based Leona will receive $7,110 per pupil in state funding, plus an as-yet-undetermined amount of federal funds for low-income and special education students. In addition, the Highland Park district will pay Leona a $780,000 annual management fee.

Unions have been sidelined after the district's entire professional staff was laid off, as allowed by the state emergency law, but teachers can apply for jobs with Leona. Leona has budgeted about $36,000 a year for Highland Park teachers on average, the company said—compared with almost $65,000 a year the teachers received in the 2010-11 school year.

In a typical school it takes over, Leona has hired back about 70% of the teachers, the company said. Leona also will lease the Highland Park district's buildings.

Under the five-year contract with Leona, the new city charter board will monitor the company's progress in improving student performance.

Leona runs 54 schools in five states. Students in almost half of them fail state academic benchmarks. But of its 22 Michigan schools, 19 meet the mark, Leona officials said.

Leona Chief Executive William Coats said the company had no incentive to cut corners in Highland Park. "As we build equity, we give that back to the schools," he said during Wednesday's meeting when an audience member raised doubts about the for-profit approach. "We're trying to manage this so you [the district] stay in business."

Highland Park is where Henry Ford opened his first assembly line and Chrysler Corp. built its original headquarters. It has suffered the same ills as Detroit, its larger neighbor: an exodus of auto jobs, depressed housing stock and a surge in crime.

The Washington Post

August 15, 2012

Charter School Known for Rigor Comes to DC

By OLGA KHAZAN

Most school leaders say they strive to reach high standards. A public charter school has arrived in the District with a distinctive brand of academic rigor.

Sixth-graders at the school, Basis D.C., take physics and Latin. Fifth-graders read "Beowulf." After they wrap up their minimum six Advanced Placement classes, Basis high school students can tackle organic chemistry and game theory.

The D.C. branch of Basis starts Aug. 27. This week, students are being drilled in study skills, reading and math in the school's new Penn Quarter building as part of a voluntary two-week boot camp.

In a math prep session, teacher Robert Biemesderfer gave a class of mostly fifth- and sixth-graders 15 seconds to complete a row of multiplication problems. Mental math ability, Biemesderfer said, atrophies over the summer. "And by the way," he said, "can anyone tell me what 'atrophy' means?"

Behind him, a PowerPoint slide read "Nothing halfway," which is a Basis aphorism, along with "It's cool to be smart" and "Walk with purpose."

The two-week program aims to prepare students to perform at the level of their counterparts in Arizona, where Basis began. There, school officials say, a high share of graduates score high enough on tests to be ranked as "AP Scholars With Distinction" and many are National Merit scholars.

"I like the way they teach; it's interactive," said Annadora Garner, a rising fifth-grader. "Some of the math is hard, but I think it will get easier."

Mary Siddall, a Basis mom who spearheaded the effort to bring the school to the District, said everything is hard at Basis.

"We believe everything that's worth achieving requires hard work," Siddall said.

Basis was launched in 1998 in Tucson by educators Olga and Michael Block, who believed a traditional middle school curriculum wasn't strong enough for their daughter. Basis has eight campuses in Arizona; those in Tucson and Scottsdale are ranked among the nation's most challenging by Washington Post education columnist Jay Mathews and have drawn praise from other analysts.

The Blocks and other Basis advocates say the schools show how to help U.S. students catch up to those in high-performing countries such as Finland and South Korea.

Basis students who don't pass a comprehensive exam at the end of each year are required to repeat the grade. Teachers receive bonuses for each student who gets a 4 or 5, the top score, on an AP test.

The school hires teachers who have advanced degrees in their field but not necessarily a teaching license. The Blocks chose the District in part because the city does not require public charter school teachers to have a D.C. teaching license.

Of course, Basis doesn't have a monopoly on high standards. Plenty of regular and charter schools aim to stretch students academically. But Basis is known for a teaching style that stresses hard work and depth of knowledge.

"There's a tendency in education that we somehow have to make it entertaining for kids," said Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform, a D.C. group that advocates school choice. "The Basis philosophy is that it can be exhilarating to learn a great amount of knowledge."

EDUCATION WEEK

August 22, 2012

Debate Revs Up Around Closing Low-Achieving Charter Schools

By Sean Cavanagh

One of the most vexing questions about charter schools—when low-performing ones should be shut down—is receiving new attention, amid concerns that lax and inconsistent standards for closing them will undermine the public's confidence in the sector.

Over the past few years, a growing number of researchers, policymakers, and charter school backers have called for removing obstacles to closing academically struggling schools, though many barriers remain.

Numerous states have approved laws in recent years that have raised or clarified standards for charter school performance, while also establishing policies to make it easier for charters to open and to secure facilities and public funding.

Even so, state and local policies vary greatly in their expectations for charter schools, and in the standards they set for authorizers—the state, local, or independent entities typically charged with approving charters and overseeing their performance.

According to a report released this year, the nationwide rate of closure of charters schools up for renewal has actually fallen over the past three years, which could be interpreted as a sign of improved quality, weaker oversight, or some combination of both. Another recent estimate shows that the percentage of charters in different states that have shut their doors varies widely—from zero to 5 percent in some states to well over 20 percent in others.

Debates about the standards for closing struggling charters are nothing new, either in the context of broader policy discussions or in communities weighing the performance of individual schools. But the issue has received more intense focus lately from pro-charter groups that say they want to ensure that the sector, which has grown fairly steadily for two decades, is held to high standards.

'Heart' of the Bargain

Those concerns underscore the fundamental promises of the charter school movement, and the tensions within it, observed Todd Ziebarth, the vice president for state advocacy and support at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, in Washington. Charters were designed to operate with more autonomy than regular public schools—though advocates like Mr. Ziebarth say state and local policies often stifle that independence—while also facing higher degrees of accountability, he said.

Decisions about closure "go to the very heart of public charter schools," Mr. Ziebarth said. Today, supporters of the schools "are asking tough questions about both sides of the charter bargain."

Others point out that many low-performing charters do, in fact, close, and warn against state and local officials setting overly rigid standards for judging performance without considering the challenges individual schools face.

"Trying to create one-size-fits-all formulas—that flies in the face of what charter schools should be," said Jeanne Allen, the president of the Center for Education Reform, a Washington organization that supports such schools. Authorizers need to be held to high standards for judging charters, she said, but also "actively understand the context of each school."

Debates about charter quality notwithstanding, research suggests that academically struggling charters do not get a free pass.

A larger percentage of low-performing charters close—19 percent—than do similarly struggling public schools—11 percent—according to a 2010 study conducted by David A. Stuit, a partner at Basis Policy Research, an independent research organization in Raleigh, N.C., for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a Washington think tank that supports charters. That study focused on 10 states, which have about 70 percent of the country's charters.

Nationwide, 15 percent of the 6,700 charter schools that have opened over the past two decades have shut their doors for one reason or another, according to the Center for Education Reform. The largest proportion of those closures, nearly 42 percent, were the result of financial woes, usually related to low enrollment or lack of funding, the CER concluded. Twenty-four percent closed for reasons of mismanagement, and a smaller share, 19 percent, were shut down for academic reasons.

At the same time, overall closure rates for charters whose contracts were up for renewal declined from 12.6 percent in 2008 to 6.2 percent two years later, the most recent year tallied, according to the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, a Chicago organization that seeks to improve charter school quality. NACSA officials say they can't be certain whether improved school performance, changes in the practices of authorizers, political pressure to keep charters open, or other factors were behind the decline.

Role of Authorizers

The vast majority of charter authorizers in the United States, about 90 percent, are school districts, with universities, independent chartering boards, nonprofit organizations, and state agencies making up most of the rest.

Many charter supporters have joined NACSA in describing authorizers' work as critical to ensuring that sound charter schools prosper and underperformers are weeded out. That theme was sounded in a report by David Osborne, a consultant and former adviser to the

Chicago Tribune

September 11, 2012

Reformers see things differently than striking teachers do

By Bill Ruthhart and Diane Rado
Tribune reporters

Two issues being cited as primary stumbling blocks to a Chicago teachers contract are a recall policy for teachers and a teacher evaluation system. Both affect job security for teachers and are part of larger efforts to overhaul schools in the city and nationally.

Teacher recall policy

The Chicago Teachers Union is pushing hard for a procedure to recall teachers who have been laid off because of school closings, consolidations and turnarounds. The issue is of critical importance, the union has said, because of rumors the district plans to close as many as 100 schools in coming years.

Earlier this year, CPS and the union struck a deal over the longer school day that temporarily allowed for such a recall. In exchange for the union agreeing to an extra 30 minutes in high schools and 75 minutes in elementary schools, CPS agreed to rehire nearly 500 teachers in noncore subjects from a pool of teachers who had been laid off.

The district, however, has resisted making such a recall policy the permanent method for filling vacancies in Chicago schools.

"Teachers in this city agreed to a longer day ... and what our union got in return for that was a promise there would be a recall procedure for those teachers who are going to be hired," said Jesse Sharkey, vice president of CTU. "Now we see that offer is being taken away from the table, and there is no sign of respect there. That's important for our members."

Mayor Rahm Emanuel has said he doesn't want to place the district's hiring control in the hands of the union through such a recall process.

"I don't believe I should pick 'em. I don't believe CPS should pick 'em. I don't believe the CTU leadership should pick 'em," Emanuel said Monday of hiring teachers. "If we're going to hold our local principals in the school accountable for getting the results we need, they need to pick the best qualified."

In the district's latest proposal, CPS teachers whose schools are closed would be eligible for vacancies at the school that takes in the transferred students. If there are no vacancies, the teachers would have three options: a three-month lump-sum severance, five months in a "reassigned teacher pool" or a spot in a "quality teacher force pool," which would entitle those teachers to an interview and an explanation if they are not hired.

The CPS offer also provides options for teachers displaced for other reasons, including turnarounds or phaseouts.

Jeanne Allen, president of the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Education Reform, said recall policies do not encourage improvement or change within school districts but rather a status quo that has never led to improvement in educating children.

But the teachers union has countered that its members deserve as much job security as possible.

Teacher ratings

Teacher contract negotiations often come down to money and benefits, so parents might be wondering how employee evaluations became a stumbling

REUTERS

September 29, 2012

'Parent Power' film stirs hopes of education reform activists

By STEPHANIE SIMON

*** Film spearheads movement to give parents greater control**

*** Eliminating tenure for veteran teachers controversial goal**

*** Powerful teachers' unions in movement's crosshairs**

Education reform film "Won't Back Down" opened Friday to terrible reviews - and high hopes from activists who expect the movie to inspire parents everywhere to demand big changes in public schools.

The drama stars Maggie Gyllenhaal as a spirited mother who teams up with a passionate teacher to seize control of their failing neighborhood school, over the opposition of a self-serving teachers union.

Reviewers called it trite and dull, but education reformers on both the left and right have hailed the film as a potential game-changer that could aid their fight to weaken teachers' unions and inject more competition into public education.

Private foundations, nonprofit advocacy groups and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce have pumped more than $2 million into advocacy efforts tied to "Won't Back Down," including 30-second ads, promotional bookmarks, websites, private screenings and a six-month, cross-country discussion tour that will keep the film in circulation long after it leaves theaters.

Their goal: To attract new foot soldiers who will help them fight for legislation that allows parents to seize control of local schools, as dramatized in the film; eliminates tenure protections for veteran teachers; and opens the door for more competition to neighborhood schools in the form of charters, which are publicly funded but privately run.

"This movie has the potential to be one of the most transformative vehicles in the history of education reform," said Ben Austin, a longtime Democratic activist.

Austin now runs Parent Revolution, which promotes "parent trigger" laws allowing parents unhappy with struggling schools to take control, fire teachers and bring in private management. His organization is holding 35 private screenings of "Won't Back Down" in states from Georgia to Utah to New York over the next month to rally more parents to the cause. "This movie is telling a story that's relevant to hundreds of thousands of parents across America," Austin said.

Union leaders, for their part, have slammed the movie as a propaganda film that bears little resemblance to reality. Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, has called it "egregiously misleading" and complained that several scenes seemed designed for "the sole purpose of undermining people's confidence in public education, public school teachers and teacher unions."

Parent groups that support teachers' unions have organized protests outside some screenings. And they've been gleefully posting negative reviews of "Won't Back Down" on Facebook and Twitter.

PUSH FOR CHARTER SCHOOLS

So far, the reform coalition has ignored the bad reviews and pushed ahead with their marketing efforts.

The drive to capitalize on the movie grows out of lingering disappointment within the education reform community over the last major film to carry their message, the documentary "Waiting for 'Superman.'"

Produced by Walden Media, which is also behind "Won't Back Down," the documentary chronicled dysfunction in urban schools and the desperation of parents trying to find alternatives for their children.

"Waiting for 'Superman'" was well-received and widely viewed, thanks to backing by the Gates Foundation. But activists hoping for a big boost from the film were disappointed.

"We didn't feel we captured anyone," said Matt David, a consultant to Michelle Rhee, former chancellor of Washington D.C. public schools and a major figure in the reform movement. Many viewers walked out angry at the public school system, he said, but had no way to channel that emotion into action.

This time, Rhee is moving quickly to provide a channel. Her advocacy group, StudentsFirst, has bought 30-second ads to run before showings of "Won't Back Down" in 1,500 theaters and sponsored marketing efforts to drive viewers to her website. That website has been revamped to feature an "action center" where people moved by the film can sign up to join StudentsFirst, view short videos about its agenda (including one from comedian and newly appointed board member Bill Cosby), and share their own experiences with public schools.

The Center for Education Reform's website urges viewers to launch their own charter schools to compete with public schools. "You don't need a PhD or a teaching degree to start a school," the center's website advises. "Remember, you can do it now." The most enduring campaign linked to the film may be the six-month "Breaking the Monopoly of Mediocrity" tour arranged by the Institute for a Competitive Workforce, an affiliate of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Drawing on a $1.2 million grant from the Daniels Fund, the group plans to stage private screenings and discussion forums for business and civic leaders in cities from Memphis, Tennessee, to El Paso, Texas, to Trenton, New Jersey. The American Federation of Teachers is countering with its own series of town hall meetings and workshops across the country designed to present teachers - and unions - as natural allies of parents seeking to better their schools.

The Washington Times

October 1, 2012

Schools strike shows union opposition growing

By Ben Wolfgang
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

With Chicago's ugly strike behind them, teachers unions are regrouping with a public relations blitz, meant to both repair a tarnished image and rally members who are under more fire than ever.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the parent organization of the Chicago Teachers Union, will hold town halls, workshops and other events in the coming weeks in New York, Philadelphia and nearly a dozen other major cities, the labor group announced Sept. 21.

The move, analysts say, shows that unions aren't backing down after the Chicago strike, which lasted more than a week and grew out of a bitter battle with Mayor Rahm Emanuel over teacher evaluations, salaries and other issues.

Rather than unions' Waterloo, the Chicago walkout likely was a precursor of things to come.

"Unless the balance of power changes, there will be another strike," said Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform and critic of teachers unions. "Just because [Chicago] was the first strike in a while does not mean they're less interested in sticking to their guns. ... It's not yet to the point where there's outrage [among the public] to spark a revolution against this."

The strike was first time in more than 25 years that Windy City teachers walked off the job. The standoff with Mr. Emanuel, a former chief of staff for President Obama, was resolved with concessions from both sides.

Teachers will get an average 17.6 percent pay raise, significantly less than the 30 percent hike initially sought, over the next four years. The union successfully fought off Mr. Emanuel's efforts to have student test scores count for as much as 45 percent of teacher evaluations, negotiating the number down to no higher than 30 percent, according to terms of the deal.

Teachers also succeeded in resisting merit pay and maintaining seniority systems, while Mr. Emanuel pushed through an extended school day and year.

Labor may not have gotten all it wanted in the deal, but it still views the outcome in Chicago as a victory and an opportunity to reinforce its control over public education.

"What's happened in Chicago has changed the conversation and shown that, by communities uniting and acting collectively, we can transform our schools and guarantee every child the high-quality public education he or she deserves," said AFT President Randi Weingarten. "Now let's hope this turns the page to a new chapter in education reform."

Building public support is crucial to teachers unions' long-term strategy for two reasons. One, states and local governments simply can't afford to push through controversial reforms — such as Mr. Emanuel's teacher evaluation effort, backed by the Obama administration — by offering lucrative pay increases.

Two, the Democratic Party now includes a number of voices openly opposed to the power of unions.

"People have short memories. Everybody will get over [the Chicago strike]. The problem is, this is just a terrible time for unions," said Terry M. Moe, an educational policy scholar and senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution. "The financial crisis has made life very difficult for them because districts and states are strapped. But the deeper thing is a reformist movement within the Democratic Party. ... The fact is, there are a number of Democrats who are increasingly willing to stand up to these unions."

Los Angeles Mayor and Democrat Antonio Villaraigosa, for example, offered strong words of support for Mr. Emanuel during the strike. Former Washington, D.C. Mayor Adrian M. Fenty, also a Democrat, did the same.

At the federal level, President Obama, while still relying on the AFT and the National Education Association for grass-roots political support and organization, has taken steps opposed by labor.

The president's signature Race to the Top initiative promoted teacher evaluation methods tied to student test scores. Unions have vehemently opposed such efforts.

Groups such as Democrats for Education Reform continue to grow in stature and influence, and are among the loudest critics of the power that teachers unions have over education policy in the U.S.

Public-sector labor groups also have come under attack by governors, most notably Wisconsin's Scott Walker, a Republican. He successfully eliminated most of the collective-bargaining rights for teachers, though a judge has thrown out most of those changes. Mr. Walker has vowed to appeal.

As a place to make a stand against that tide, labor saw Chicago as a natural choice, said Justin Wilson, managing director of the Center for Union Facts.

"You've got a different set

EDUCATION WEEK

JANUARY 3, 2013

D.C. Law Tops Charter List

The Center for Education Reform has released its 14th annual scorecard on charter school laws.

The District of Columbia came in first as having the strongest of the nation's 43 charter laws, earning an A. Other A-rated states were Minnesota, Indiana, and Michigan. Nine states earned a B, 16 states earned a C, and 11 states earned D and F grades.

Kansas, Iowa, Virginia, and Mississippi earned Fs.

States were ranked based on whether or not they have independent charter authorizers, and an appeal process for rejected charter applications, how much operational autonomy charters have, whether or not there is a cap on the number of charters, the amount of student and facility funding provided to charters, and how they have implemented the laws.

Jeanne Allen, the president of the Center for Education Reform, which supports charter schools, said the scorecard shows only "satisfactory progress."

"In the past two years, we've seen two new charter laws but both are average in their construction, unlikely to yield large numbers of successful charter schools, and only minimal state improvements," she said in a press release.

—KATIE ASH

The Washington Post

February 1, 2013

Johns Hopkins redevelops surrounding area, school

BY NICK ANDERSON

BALTIMORE — The renowned Johns Hopkins University medical campus looms over East Baltimore like a fortress on a hill. On its northern edge lies a humble neighborhood of rowhouses weathered by decades of crime, poverty and decay.

The research powerhouse in health sciences was long seen as indifferent to the social ills festering on its doorstep, or as powerless to cure them. That view echoes in cities across the country where universities thrive next to slums.

But Hopkins is seeking to engineer the revival of a huge swath of East Baltimore through an 88-acre redevelopment project that includes taking over a struggling public school. It is unusual for an elite university to dive so deeply into urban education and redevel-

HOPKINS CONTINUED ON A15

opment at the same time.

The elementary and middle school, which Hopkins operates and subsidizes, is scheduled to move from its temporary neighborhood location into a nearby, newly constructed campus this year a couple blocks from the medical complex, where it will reboot under the university's brand name.

The hope here is that the Henderson-Hopkins School will lure working-class families to a place that once drove them away. The university has an inherent self-interest: Safety and prosperity on its borders will make the medical campus more attractive for students and faculty.

"They knew that a school was one of the things this neighborhood needs," said Betty Carlos, 66, whose daughter Gift is in third grade at the school and grandson Kyrin is in fourth grade. "You can't ask people to move into these $200,000 houses and not have a good school."

Carlos, a lifelong resident of East Baltimore, said she was angry when forced out of her home a few years ago to make way for the redevelopment, which has been underway now for a decade. That friction still echoes here from time to time when skeptics ask exactly how much the project has helped the community. Officials say that they have tracked and aided hundreds of displaced families and that the school will give their children enrollment priority.

Carlos said she and her daughter Michelle, a cook at the Johns Hopkins Hospital, are thinking of buying a house in the redevelopment zone. She said Hopkins won't let the school fail. "They'll do everything they can to not be shamed."

For generations, colleges have worked with public schools to facilitate teacher training and education research. But in recent times, relatively few major universities have invested their brand in a modern urban school to the extent Hopkins has. Obstacles to success are high, and the task can be hard to square with a university's mission.

The University of Pennsylvania gave its name and financial support to an acclaimed public school known as Penn Alexander that in the past decade has helped rejuvenate west Philadelphia. Stanford University oversees a charter high school in East Palo Alto, Calif., but was forced to shut down a companion elementary school in 2010 amid debate about its performance.

"It's risky," acknowledged Susan H. Fuhrman, president of Teachers College at Columbia University, which recently put its name on a New York public school. "With heightened accountability, you are on the line for student achievement. But if every university in an urban setting did this, it would be a huge boost. We're neighbors, and we have an obligation."

Nationwide, the Center for Education Reform counts about 50 charter schools with close university partnerships.

In the Washington region, Howard University launched the Howard University Middle School of Mathematics and Science, a charter school, on its Northwest Washington campus in 2005. The University of Maryland is involved with a charter school to open in College Park in August. George Mason University plans to open a small school-within-a-school — the Patriot Innovation Academy — in September at Lake Braddock Secondary School in Fairfax County. George Washington University has close ties with School Without Walls, a selective D.C. public high school on its Foggy Bottom campus, although it does not run it.

Hopkins President Ronald J. Daniels, in an interview on the main campus in north Baltimore, said the university must shoulder more responsibility for the welfare of a city of 619,000 that has been its home since 1876.

A former provost at U-Penn, Daniels cites the Ivy League university's work in rebuilding west Philadelphia as a model. He has pushed Hopkins to deepen its engagement with East Baltimore since he arrived here in 2009. "We've really elevated it to a higher level," he said. "There was a perception that we weren't doing all that we could be doing."

In the neighborhood

One Hopkins official who helps oversee the East Baltimore school is combating that perception, taking a direct personal stake in the project.

David Andrews, dean of the school of education at Hopkins, recently took two abandoned rowhouses on East Chase Street — in the redevelopment zone — knocked down walls and renovated the property as a three-story home for himself. He wanted to understand the area Henderson-Hopkins will serve.

Andrews, 56, his wife, Marti, 59, and their dog, Lola, a 7-year-old Weimaraner, moved in last March.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

March 11, 2013

New Front in Charter Schools

In Massachusetts, a Pair of Democrats Push to Lift Restrictions in Some Districts

By Jennifer Levitz

BOSTON—Massachusetts lawmakers are considering eliminating a cap on the number of charter schools that can operate in the lowest-performing school districts, including here in the capital city.

While other states also have weighed lifting caps, charter advocates point to left-leaning Massachusetts as a somewhat unlikely model for the movement. "This demonstrates that charter schools are a viable reform," said Nina Rees, president of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, a nonprofit aimed at advancing the movement. "If it can happen in Massachusetts, it can happen anywhere."

Charter schools receive public funding but, unlike public schools, employ mostly nonunion teachers and have autonomy in school districts, which allows them to set their own conditions, such as longer school days. They have long been embraced by Republicans for introducing choice in education, but have been assailed by some teacher unions and others as hurting traditional public schools.

The Massachusetts legislation to end the cap was proposed by Democrats, state Sen. Barry Finegold and Rep. Russell Holmes. It would abolish all caps on charter schools and charter-school spending in 29 low-performing school districts, including Boston.

The 107,000-member Massachusetts Teachers Association is likely to oppose the bill, said union president Paul Toner. Under state law, schools' funding is linked to the number of attending students, so charter schools divert much-needed funds from traditional schools, he said.

Nationally, about 20 states have laws limiting the expansion of charter schools, according to the Center for Education Reform, a group that advocates for charter schools. Hawaii, Idaho and Missouri lifted caps last year.

Massachusetts' current limit on charter schools statewide is 120, with 76 now in operation. State law also caps districts' net school spending on charter tuition to 18% in underperforming districts and 9% in others. Statewide, charter groups say there are 45,000 applicants on waiting lists, though that number may include students who apply to multiple schools.

Mr. Finegold, the bill's sponsor and the son of public-school teachers, said his motivation sprung from conversations with parents in Lawrence, part of his district northwest of Boston, where the struggling school district was taken over by the state in 2011. The state has since brought in charter operators to run two low-performing schools, and parents told him, "we'd be out of here" had that not happened, Mr. Finegold said. "One thing I don't think people realize—charter schools are keeping a lot of the middle class in cities," he said.

A coalition of charter advocates, charitable leaders and business groups—including the Pioneer Institute, a free-market Boston think tank—are pushing for the bill. But it has plenty of critics. The popular liberal Massachusetts blog Blue Mass Group wrote recently that Mr. Finegold "throws away his political future," having "taken the lead for school privatization."

In the Democratic-controlled legislature, the prospects for the bill, which was only recently unveiled, aren't yet clear. Gov. Deval Patrick, a Democrat and supporter of charter schools, declined to comment on the legislation. His point person on the issue, Mitchell Chester, the state's commissioner of elementary and secondary education, said he would consider raising the cap, but perhaps in three years. Massachusetts is now adding new charter schools "incrementally and in a way that makes sense," Mr. Chester said.

Because other states look to Massachusetts—where students overall routinely rank at the top of national and international tests—for lessons on academic achievement and innovation, the Bay State's policies on charter schools are being followed closely, former Florida education commissioner Gerard Robinson told charter advocates gathered in Boston recently.

Nationally, charter schools are educating more than 2.3 million students in the 2012-13 school year, 275,000 more than last year, the largest single-year jump since the movement began 20 years ago, according to the National Alliance for Charter Schools.

More than 31,000 Massachusetts students attend charter schools, an increase of 20% in the past four years. Parents like Tori Willis, a widow who moved her 17-year-old son, Asante Sandiford, from a traditional Boston public school to City on a Hill charter school three years ago, are drawn to the focus on college preparation and manners. Asante must tuck in his shirt, and he shakes hands with the headmaster each day.

Unlike many other states, advocates say, Massachusetts' governance system designates state education officials as sole authorizers of independently run charter schools, overruling local mayors and unions.

"We set a high bar for what it takes to get a charter. We watch them closely, and we exit those charters that don't measure up," said Mr. Chester.

Massachusetts ranks its schools from Level One, the highest, to Level Five based on academic achievement, graduation and dropout rates. This year, 59% of charter schools in the state were Level One, compared with 31% of non-charter schools.

In a move being watched nationally, Massachusetts has begun enlisting its best charter-school operators to help turn around several struggling traditional public schools. Typically, charter operators open new schools from scratch, Mr. Chester said.

"If you can't use this state as a point for lifting the cap...I don't know what else you can use," said Ms. Rees, of the national charter-school alliance.

the
CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM

IN THE STATES

State & Local News

The Seattle Times

January 20, 2012

Lively debate in WA House panel on charter schools

By DONNA GORDON BLANKINSHIP

BELLEVUE, Wash. — Despite the snow and ice, dozens of people managed to bring a variety of perspectives on charter schools to the state Legislature this week.

More than 20 people - including parents and teachers on both sides of the issue - came to Olympia on Friday to express their opinions about House Bill 2428 before the House Education Committee. The Senate Education Committee held a similarly snow-challenged but lively hearing on Wednesday.

On Friday, many expressed concerns about the proposal taking money away from traditional public schools. The bill does have an expected cost to the state and school districts, but mostly for administration of one part of the proposal that would create a new statewide school district to be used to take over failing schools and operate them like independent charters. This part of the proposal would be run by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Charters are public schools that run independently from district controls, but are instead governed by a multi-year performance contract that requires proof that a school is improving student achievement.

Some people testifying Friday worried about whether the state was doing everything it could to make a difference for the lowest achieving students and said some said they thought avoiding charters would be a mistake. The primary sponsor, Rep. Eric Pettigrew, D-Seattle, spoke with particular passion on this point.

"There has to be something done now," Pettigrew said after listing all the ways his home school district is failing kids including the drop-out rate, the achievement gap among kids from different ethnic groups and African American kids doing worse than African immigrants.

Pettigrew, who was raised by a single mom who didn't go to high school in a poor area of Los Angeles, says education saved his life.

"I think there are a lot more Eric Pettigrews we are leaving on the table every day," he said.

Many shades between pro and con came to light. For example, some said charters would be unfair because they would help such a small percentage of the state's school population. Others suggested getting rid of state rules that stifle innovation at every public school, not just for charter schools.

Lillian Ortiz-Self from the Washington State Commission on Hispanic Affairs spoke against the charter schools bill, saying it does not answer the constitutional requirement for free and appropriate education for all.

"We cannot afford to let our public school system off the hook," she said, acknowledging that some charters work well for a few kids, but others do not. "We cannot afford to leave some of our children behind."

Catherine Ahl of the League of Women Voters also spoke in opposition to the proposal. She objected mostly to the way some private boards would take over the education of some public school students.

She said her organization led the opposition to charter schools each of the three times Washington voters turned down the idea in the past because the group wants representative government overseeing the spending of tax dollars.

"If all it takes (to improve schools) is doing away with rules and regulations that all of you passed, then do away with them for everybody," Ahl said.

Washington is one of eight states without charter schools, according to the Center for Education Reform, an advocacy group that supports charters. The other states are Alabama, Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and West Virginia.

Washington voters rejected initiatives calling for charter schools in 1996, 2000 and 2004. The Legislature rejected charter bills on several other occasions before they reached the ballot.

Lucinda Young of the Washington Education Association, the state's largest teacher's union, joined a chorus of people saying existing public schools could do a much better job with more money.

Several national studies were mentioned during the testimony, but the same information was used by different people to promote testimony on opposing sides.

Dan Steele of the Washington Association of School Administrators said his group opposes the charter schools proposal and still considers the idea an untested experiment.

"There have been many charter schools that have been miserable failures and we don't consider them to be worth the risk," Steele said.

Robin Lake, who is an education researcher at the University of Washington but spoke as a parent with kids in Seattle Public Schools, talked about the dozens of urban school districts successfully partnering with charter management organization.

She said the rigorous studies on charter schools over the past 20 years show that they persistently outpace traditional public schools in raising student achievement in low income areas.

"We need to act with urgency. Given the challenges ahead of us, we need all hands on deck," she said. "After 20 years, I think charter schools have a proven track record."

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

January 26, 2012

Are you ready to allow the Legislature access to local education funds in pursuit of greater school choice?

by MAUREEN DOWNEY

To mark National School Choice Week, the Center for Education Reform has held daily webinars on choice issues. Today, the center's director Jeanne Allen speculated on the future of choice in states, only mentioning Georgia in passing for its special education voucher and private school scholarships.

Allen said two main factors determine state success in expanding school choice through vouchers and more charter schools: There has to be a "strong actor in the state, someone who wakes up every morning with a fire in the belly bound and determined to get it done."

Second, Allen said there must be "friends on the ground," strong grassroots groups to "show the Legislature that there is support and to cover the back of that actor."

I am not sure if we have that "strong actor" in Georgia, although House Speaker Pro Tempore Jan Jones may be the closest thing.

Rep. Jones, R-Milton, is sponsoring HR 1162, a constitutional amendment that would allow the state to approve charter schools over the objections of local school boards and redirect local dollars to them through a legislative sleight of hand.

If HR 1162 passes, the proposed amendment would be on the ballot in November. (You can find a petition for HR 1162 here.)

Last year, the state Supreme Court struck down a state-created commission authorized to approve charters and fund the schools at a level that incorporated local spending. (The state essentially funded the local share and dunned the locals that amount in their state allotment.)

To summarize the Supreme Court's rationale for rejecting the state commission, I am turning to one of the winning attorneys Thomas Cox, who represented Gwinnett County in the challenge:

The Court ruled that the Charter Commission Act ran afoul of the Georgia Constitution for two primary reasons. First, the Court held that the schools authorized by the Act were not in fact "special schools" as contemplated by the relevant provision of the Georgia Constitution. After examining the history, including comments by committee members and drafters of the relevant sections of the 1983 Constitution, the Court concluded that "special schools" were intended to mean schools that enrolled only students with certain special needs (including, for example, the Georgia School for the Deaf and School for the Blind and vocational trade schools). The term was not intended, according to the Court, to create "a carte blanche authorization for the General Assembly to create its own general K-12 schools so as to duplicate the efforts of or compete with locally controlled schools for the same pool of students educated with the same limited pool of tax funds. " Second, the Court held that the purported authorization of state-created, but locally operating, charter schools, which are not approved by the local boards of education, infringed on the "fundamental principle of exclusive local control" of public education embodied in the Georgia Constitution.

The success or failure of the forthcoming effort to amend the Georgia Constitution to permit the state to create its own charter schools, with access to locally levied tax revenues, will likely determine whether, going forward, the front lines in the battles over charter schools will be established at the local or state levels. If the Georgia Constitution is amended as proposed by some in the General Assembly, then the State will become the ultimate authority in approving or denying charter schools and in mandating the direction of local tax revenues to fund those schools.

Rep. Jones essentially resurrects the Charter Schools Commission in her resolution, which she will be presenting to the House Education Committee this afternoon. The proposed change to the constitution contains this pivotal nugget with regard to control of locally collected school taxes: "The state is authorized to expend funds for the support and maintenance of special schools in such amount and manner as may be provided by law, which may include, but not be limited to, adjusting the proportion of state funds with respect to the affected local school systems."

I suspect Georgia voters are going to be wary of turning over the keys to their local treasuries to the state Legislature. School taxes represent a sizable chunk of the local taxes collected, and this constitutional amendment would cede unprecedented access to lawmakers in Atlanta in the name of school choice.

The Washington Post

February 21, 2012

Chartering success

Schools' growth in Pr. George's is sign of efforts to expand county's education options

BY OVETTA WIGGINS

Over the past few years, Prince George's County has quietly amassed the largest cluster of charter schools in the Washington suburbs.

Three of the independently run, publicly funded schools opened this school year in Prince George's, bringing the county's total to seven. That is the highest concentration in Maryland outside of Baltimore. The growth is a sign that charter schools are a key component in School Superintendent William R. Hite Jr.'s efforts to expand the county's menu of education options.

"I support the expansion of quality schools, that's regardless of the type of school," Hite said. "It's all about more choices for our parents."

Although the charter sector is booming in the District, there are no charter schools in Northern Virginia. Montgomery County approved one last year, but it has yet to open. And a few charter schools are scattered in Frederick, Anne Arundel and St. Mary's counties.

Hite, meanwhile, is scouting for more.

One of the latest additions to the Prince George's cadre of charters is Chesapeake Math & IT Academy in Laurel.

At Chesapeake, housed in a nondescript office park building off Interstate 95, students gather in classes of 25. One day this month, they were learning a computer program created by MIT in a "Berkeley" computer lab and calculating kinetic energy in the "Harvard" science class.

Chesapeake opened with 300 sixth- and seventh-graders and hopes eventually to have 700 students in grades six through 12. The academic program, which focuses on mathematics, science and information technologies, aims to prepare students for college. The idea has drawn interest: The school has received 400 applications for 50 slots next school year.

"I do harder things," sixth-grader Dorian Baldwin-Bott, 11, said of the charter's classes. "Math is more challenging. . . . At my old school, we didn't have computers too much. It was once a week. Here it's once a day."

Seventh-grader Michael Igoe, 13, adjusted the mouse on a Hewlett-Packard laptop, tapped the keyboard and began playing a computer game in Room 144, also known as the Berkeley lab.

A blue smiley face appeared on the screen and bounced from one colorful background to another while an animated voice shouted from the speakers: "Can I come and play?"

Michael created the game, part of the week's lesson plan.

Providing an opening

About 2,500 students in Prince George's attend charters, representing about 2 percent of the county's public enrollment of 123,839.

State test scores for Prince George's schools have been on the rise in recent years, but the school system's academic performance remains uneven. Large numbers of children in the county schools come from low- or moderate-income families. Some advocates say these conditions provide an opening for charters.

"In more disadvantaged areas, whether suburban or urban, [charter schools] are being welcomed," said Jeanne Allen, president of the pro-charter Center for Education Reform in Washington. "More and more people who live outside big cities are recognizing that this is a solution for some of their issues too."

Allen said growth of charter schools in Maryland has been slower than in other states because some operators view Maryland's charter law as restrictive.

Nationwide, most charter teachers are not unionized, but they are in Maryland. Charter schools in the state have flexibility in scheduling, staffing, program offerings, resource allocations and grade configurations, according to state officials. Local school boards have the authority to authorize charters, as well as the power to revoke them or deny renewal based on academic achievement, attendance, enrollment and finances.

The Center for Education Reform estimates there are 5,700 charter schools in the country serving nearly 2 million public school students. In the District, more than 40 percent of the city's 78,000 public students attend charters, the second-highest concentration nationally.

Prince George's officials said the modest growth of charters in the county is a response to charter applications and the desire of parents.

"If [applicants] come up with an idea that parents want and they can help children achieve, parents deserve that option," said school board Chairman Verjeana M. Jacobs (District 5).

Since Maryland's charter law was enacted in 2003, Prince George's has received two to five applications each year to launch schools. Most of the county's charter schools are run by small networks. Chesapeake, for example, is run by the nonprofit Chesapeake Lighthouse Foundation, which also has schools in Anne Arundel County and Baltimore. Prince George's, which has closed a couple of charter schools because of financial and enrollment problems, opened its first charter school in 2006.

Mixed results

The three charter schools that have been running in the county for a few years have had mixed results, according to state records. Imagine Foundation met "adequate yearly progress" standards last year under the No Child Left Behind law and had higher pass rates in reading and math than the county average on the Maryland School Assessments.

Excel Academy and Turning Point Academy fell short of adequate progress under the law. Turning Point's pass rates were comparable to the county average. Excel's pass rate in reading was comparable to the county's, but its pass rate in math was lower.

Jacobs said as long as an applicant adheres to the requirements of the State Department of Education in its application, "we can't deny the opportunity."

Hite said charters and some regular public schools with special themes known as "concept schools" can help improve the overall quality of the county system. Those schools that lose enrollment, he said, should face questions about how to get better.

Watertown Daily Times

February 24, 2012

Schools struggle to adopt policies evaluating teachers' performance

NEW YORK — David Wright, a high school technology teacher in Middletown, Del., has never taught reading or math. Even so, the state planned to judge his job performance partly on student test scores in those subjects.

That was until last month, when state officials said they would throw out a provision in a new system linking teacher performance to student achievement that assessed educators such as Wright on schoolwide performance in subjects they don't teach.

"Judge me, fine, just let's make sure it's on things that I can control," Wright, 34, and president of the local chapter of the state teacher's union, said in a phone interview. "In the rush to get it done as quickly as possible, they lost some of the logic."

Delaware is in the vanguard of states developing new systems to evaluate teachers, according to Sandi Jacobs, vice president of the National Council on Teacher Quality, a nonprofit research and policy group in Washington. Delaware's struggle may foreshadow complications that other states face as they follow suit. Along with questions about fairness, states are encountering delays because of the complexity of tracking data, conflicts with teachers' unions and concern from researchers that the entire effort could be misguided.

President Barack Obama's administration has made tying teacher evaluation to student performance a centerpiece of its education agenda. Changing evaluations was a requirement for winning grants in the Education Department's $5 billion Race to the Top program, of which Delaware was an early recipient.

The evaluations also figure prominently in a proposed $5 billion grant program, part of the administration's fiscal 2013 budget, designed to revamp teacher pay and tenure plans.

States are developing data systems to show how much individual teachers contribute to student achievement. The aim: measuring pupils' improvement during their time in class, taking into account their skills when they enter. Districts would then combine these measures with more subjective evaluations, such as observation by principals. It's a shift from gauging teacher quality by the number of years on the job or advanced degrees.

Tying teacher evaluations to student test scores is vital to determine how educators enhance achievement, said Jeanne Allen, president of the Washington-based Center for Education Reform, which supports charter schools and diminished union power.

"Until we get to the point that school leadership can hire and fire, and they themselves can be hired and fired based on the value they add to a child's life, we're not making progress on improving education," Allen said by telephone. "Evaluation is the first step, and performance pay is the second."

Twenty-three states and the District of Columbia require that objective measures of student achievement, such as student test scores, be included in the evaluation of teachers, according to an October report from the teacher-quality council.

"We're seeing a real sea change," Jacobs, the council's vice president, said in a phone interview. "Two or three years ago, almost no place was using any objective evidence of student performance."

Pam Nichols, director of communications at the Delaware State Education Association, the state's only teachers union, with 12,000 members, said officials shouldn't rush to implement evaluation systems.

"It's not about getting it done," Nichols said by telephone from Dover. "It's about getting it done right, or it's a waste of money and you're not really seeing if a teacher is effectively doing what he or she was hired to do."

State officials and hundreds of teachers in Delaware, the sixth least-populous state, are working to establish guidelines that will measure student performance on subjects that aren't tested using the Delaware Comprehensive Assessment System, the standard state exam for grades 3 through 10. According to Race to the Top, they must have the guidelines in place by the start of the 2012-2013 school year, said Diane Donohue, special assistant for educator effectiveness at the state education department.

In contrast with states such as New York and New Jersey, where government and union representatives have sparred, collaboration between the two has been

The Clarion-Ledger

February 29, 2012

Charter schools funding hot issue

■ Lawmakers face question of impact on traditional schools

By Marquita Brown
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As state lawmakers work to relax requirements for opening charter schools in Mississippi, the unanswered question is can the state afford both or will it leave both underfunded.

Today, the House Education Committee will take up House Bill 888, which includes broader allowances for charter schools. Last week, the Senate passed SB 2401 that would allow charter schools in every Mississippi school district with some restrictions.

If a district has enough demand for a charter school, the state and local dollars should follow the child, said John Moore, chairman of the House Education Committee and principal author of HB 888.

The problem with the argument that scarce resources would be spread over a larger group of students is "you're not increasing the number of kids," said Moore, R-Brandon.

Critics of those groups are no longer in a fixed group. Most charter schools cap their enrollment, meaning some students who might have wanted to attend the new school can't and would likely remain in traditional public schools, which would then be operating with less money.

"Mississippi has very scarce resources. We can't afford to fund schools at the level that most people would acknowledge they need to be funded," said Nancy Loome, executive director of the Parents' Campaign. That's also true for other public service agencies, she said.

Loome, who heads a net-

See FUNDING, 4A

work of more than 60,000 people, said she has heard from parents of students in home schools and in private schools who are interested in charter schools. Adding more students to the mix leads to less funding for all students and a less efficient use of resources, she said.

Superintendents of traditional public schools have said they increased class sizes, postponed building maintenance, made due with outdated textbooks, cut central office staff and, in some cases laid off teachers, because of cuts in state funding. Many have said additional cuts would force additional layoffs, which could include teachers.

There should be an analysis of what impact pulling students from school districts may have "on the resources left behind for the children who will remain in the public schools," said Oleta Fitzgerald, Southern regional director for the Children's Defense Fund.

Not requiring or discussing "a fiscal impact analysis in Mississippi just does not seem to be reasonable," she said, "especially for people who pride themselves on fiscal responsibility."

The bills should require no additional appropriations because "there is no money for new buildings that would be provided by the state," said Forest Thigpen, president of the Mississippi Center for Public Policy. Charter schools would have money donated to help with the costs of building or renting buildings and would not have access to bond issue money or other facilities dollars available to traditional public schools, he said.

"If a school is educating children well, then they should have nothing to fear from charter schools. If they are not educating children, then there is no reason that they should continue to expect to receive money from taxpayers," Thigpen said.

Nationally, charter schools' impact on traditional public schools' funding has been mixed.

"The specifics of the policy in your state matter a lot," said Macke Raymond, director of Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes.

"In some cases across the country, charter schools didn't impact the local public school budget at all because there was a hold harmless provision so that the districts continue to receive the same budgetary amounts regardless of how many students they lost to a charter school," Raymond said.

Addressing funding equity requires a different view than charter schools versus traditional public ones, she said. Instead, Raymond said, the view should be that public schools, including public charters, need full funding.

Legislators tend to make a common mistake of "trying to be all things for all people," said Jeanne Allen, president of the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Education Reform. They try to push for charter schools, but not full funding, and expect those schools to take on the most disadvantaged students anyway, she said.

"It's not money alone, it's having freedom to spend the money," Allen said. "But it's also being treated equitably, so there's a level playing field between traditional public schools and public charter schools."

Moore said today's meeting will likely focus on HB 888. The House charter bill has to clear the committee by Tuesday and then be voted on by the full House.

He expects a charter school bill to go to Gov. Phil Bryant, a charter school supporter, in late spring.

The Frederick Post

February 29, 2012

State charter school law ranked seventh worst

By BLAIR AMES

News-Post Staff
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The creation of great new public charter schools in Maryland requires just one simple thing, according to Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform, an advocacy organization.

"It's a law that is very clear and open to actually allowing people to step forward to get those schools," Allen said Tuesday.

Maryland is far from having what CER officials consider an adequate charter school law, she said. According to the center's 2011 annual ranking and score card of charter school laws released in January 2011, Maryland's law ranks 35th of 41 laws on the books.

As reasons for the poor rating, the report cited limitations with district-only authorizing, union requirements, school board control of charters and lack of funding for charters.

Mississippi claimed the worst ranking, while Washington D.C. was deemed to have the best charter law.

Allen will visit Frederick tonight to discuss Maryland's charter law, what she believes is lacking and what needs to be done to improve the law. The event at the C. Burr Artz Library will be hosted by FrederickEducationReform.com.

Tom Neumark, a founder of FrederickEducationReform.com, said his organization wanted to inform the public and elected officials about the rankings and how the law could be changed.

According to Allen, fixing the law won't be easy.

The state law would need to be totally rewritten for Maryland to have a quality charter school law, she said.

She suggested starting with adding an independent authorizer to form charter schools rather than school boards because school boards don't know what it's like to operate a charter school.

"They're not set up to review, approve and even consider what a new school looks like," she said. "They're not in the new schools business."

Allen said the Maryland legislature has shown no "appetite" during this session to understand the issue, let alone challenge charter school opponents.

Regarding Frederick County's charter schools, Allen said it is a tragedy that the school board is doing little to help Frederick Classical Charter School "see the light of day" and open this fall.

The charter school situation in Frederick is similar to others across the country, she said, where the state or local school board authorizes charter schools.

CDAPress.com

April 2, 2012

Idaho's charter school law ranks high

BOISE (AP) — Idaho now ranks among a dozen states with the strongest charter school laws.

That's according to the Center for Education Reform, a school choice advocate based in Washington, D.C. Idaho climbed several notches in the group's annual report, which was released Monday and ranked Idaho 12th among 42 states with laws allowing charter schools.

These schools are funded with public money but given more freedom in how they operate.

Last year, the group ranked Idaho 20th among 41 states, citing the state's cap that limited the number of new charter schools to six per year. State lawmakers did away with that cap during the 2012 session, which helped bump up the state's ranking with the Center for Education Reform.

Idaho currently has 43 charter schools holding more than 16,300 students.

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW™

April 4, 2012

Pa. charter school law ranked 13th nationally

Pennsylvania's charter school law earned a ranking of 13th nationally and a "B" grade in Tuesday's annual report from the Center for Education Reform.

"The Keystone State has historically been a major player in the charter school movement, but the reluctance of local school boards to approve new schools and their micromanagement has set it back," center President Jeanne Allen said.

In a similar study released in January, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools ranked Pennsylvania 16th.

More than 90,000 students are enrolled in 140 public charter schools in the state, including 11 cyber charter schools. An estimated 30,000 are on waiting lists.

Legislation pending in the state House would create an independent commission that would authorize and oversee charter and cyber charter schools statewide.

THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

April 5, 2012

Crossing hurdles

Treasurer OKs 17 charters, but schools need more state approval

SEVENTEEN CHARTER SCHOOLS, waiting in limbo for months, got a green light Wednesday to open from the state treasurer who said they pose no significant financial threat to the public school systems here.

By Jane Roberts

The proposed charters still must go through a state appeal process, which applicants, including former Memphis mayor Willie Herenton, said effectively derails even the soundest plans.

"I am going to cautiously say it would be very difficult to open that number of schools in such a short period of time," said Herenton, who intended to open seven W.E.B. DuBois charter schools by fall.

Ross Glotzbach, chairman of the proposed Grizzlies Preparatory Charter School, groaned at the delay.

"That's not good. We have our own Grizzlies Prep board meeting set for next week. We will have to gather information and see what we do with it."

Because charter schools are public schools, the tax money for education follows the child to the new school although the student is still counted as part of the school district's enrollment.

The unified school board had projected it would lose $27 million if the charters were allowed to open; the state calculated the loss at $13.2 million and said average daily enrollment would drop 1.38 percent for the coming year.

The majority of the charter applicants want to operate within the boundaries of Memphis City Schools, which already has 25 charters. MCS did not respond to a request for comment.

In a prepared statement, Shelby County Schools, which has one charter school, said it "appreciates and respects the review process" the Treasury Department conducted.

"We will make certain that the approved charter schools have the support they need to meet the high expectations of this district and to provide the quality instruction that parents expect in all of our schools."

The charter school applications were denied in November by the unified Shelby County school board based on harm the board said 17 new schools posed to the financial security of Memphis City Schools and Shelby County Schools.

Under a law passed last spring, the state treasurer must determine if a school board's argument of financial hardship is credible.

Three other school boards have since used the defense in Tennessee. State Treasurer David Lillard has ruled against them all.

In his 16-page report, Lillard cites numerous inaccuracies in data from the unified board, including irreconcilable differences on student enrollment, unclear computations in cost analysis and errors in how the board calculated the number of students expected to attend the new charters.

Delays in the board's responses and the number of times he had to ask for clarity slowed the process, he said.

As part of its argument against the schools, the school board said it expected to lose $70 million in city taxes when the schools merge.

But Lillard said that was not germane to the issue and threw the argument out.

Dannelle Walker, legal counsel for the state Board of Education, says it will be May before charter applicants have a final decision.

"We have to give the public a week's notice of the hearing date and then another week afterward for the public to comment. Besides that, our own staff has to have time to review the findings."

Lillard made his first request for information from the unified board on Jan. 10. The report says he did not have final reports from the school districts until March 1.

Even then, the report says, the information was insufficient.

As the process dragged on, charter applicants said they had nearly given up on being able to get financing for buildings, hire teachers and recruit students in time to open.

"We don't have a building," said Lemoyne Robinson, chancellor of City University and member of the Influence I Foundation. The foundation runs two campuses in Memphis and had applied to open two more, including a middle school for girls to open in 2012 and a high school in 2013.

"It's impossible for banks to approve loans on possibilities. It's possible we were going to open, but also possible we were not going to open," Robinson said.

Barbara Prescott, chairwoman of the Transition Planning Commission that is charged with creating the organizational structure of the merged district, says additional charter schools do not diminish the merged district.

"It does not really alter our work that much. In our Multiple Achievement Path, we acknowledge the role of charter schools ... Our plan is to embrace the fact that different kinds of public schools can provide good services to students. There are multiple paths to achievement."

Matt Throckmorton, executive director of the Tennessee Charter School Association, notes the number incorrect assumptions and fact errors the school board made in its decision to reject.

"You should know the conditions that would lead you to make those decisions when you deny," he said.

Under state law, there is no limit on the time districts have to provide information to the treasurer's office.

Monday, the Center for Education Reform gave Tennessee a C for the quality of its charter school laws, accusing state lawmakers of paying lip service to charters but refusing to create an environment where they flourish.

Tennessee also lost points for allowing fiscal impact to factor in a school board's decision.

"Any time you actually put a clause like that in law, it's a recipe for abuse," said CER president Jeanne Allen. "You are asking people who have vested interest to make decisions about how to fund charter schools."

The Press
OF ATLANTIC CITY
April 5, 2012

Report critical of state's charter school system

■ Problems cited include funding, suburban backlash and trouble with authorization and monitoring.

By DIANE D'AMICO
Education Writer

New Jersey's charter schools remain underfunded and too highly regulated by the state Department of Education, according to an annual report on education reform.

The Center for Education Reform report gave New Jersey's charter school law a "C" as the state slipped from 19th to 24th among the 41 states, as well as the District of Columbia, with charter school laws.

The drop in rank comes as suburban backlash against charter school funding grows, though Gov. Chris Christie and acting Education Commissioner Chris Cerf continue to promote the concept in struggling school districts.

"There are a lot of problems in New Jersey," Center for Education Reform President Jeanne Allen said in a teleconference on the report, which was released Monday. She said the state's charter schools remain highly regulated, get less funding than public school districts, and are authorized and monitored only by the state Department of Education.

In a phone interview, Allen said the fact that almost a third of all charter schools in the state have closed indicates there is something wrong with the current law and how charter schools are regulated. She said that nationally the closure rate is about 15 percent.

Christie has proposed several changes to the law, but in 2011 got Legislative support only for a provision to allow private schools to convert to charter schools. Christie wants to allow successful private companies to open schools and expand the pool of authorizers to other public entities, such as colleges or public school districts.

"These findings speak to the critical need to update and strengthen New Jersey's out-of-date charter law," DOE spokesman Justin Barra said in an emailed statement.

There are several bills in the state Legislature to modify the law, but some are on opposite sides of the issue. One bill would expand the entities that could authorize charter schools to include state colleges in an effort to open and monitor more schools. Another would put a three-year moratorium on adding any new schools.

The most controversial would put new charter schools up for a public vote, a provision popular in suburban districts concerned about the money being taken out of the public school budgets to fund charter schools in their towns. That bill was approved by the state Assembly in March but is still in committee in the Senate.

Allen said the push against charters in suburban districts is not new, but it does intimidate legislators worried about re-election. Allen said New Jersey has just chosen not to approve any more charters in suburban towns.

Barra said that, consistent with law, proposed charters must demonstrate how they will serve an unmet need in the community.

"There are many ways to define need, but the most important is academic performance," he said.

Allen said charter schools also need more support. She said independent authorizers would work with schools to help them succeed.

"We leave New Jersey charter schools on an island," she said. "There is no real support system from the state, and while we hear talk about change, we don't see much action."

The primary criteria used by the CER to grade the laws was how they are authorized, how much operational autonomy they have, the number of schools allowed and equitable funding.

At last week's N.J. Charter Schools Association conference, President Carlos Perez once again advocated for equal funding in New Jersey. Under the law, charter schools get 90 percent of the per-student cost in the district where they are located. They also get no state aid for buildings, a major hurdle for new schools trying to open.

At the same conference, Cerf said the department is working toward an easier regulatory environment for charters, but also tighter standards and increased accountability.

Currently four charter schools operate in Atlantic County and two in Cumberland County. Cerf announced last month that the state would not renew the charter of the academically struggling PleasanTech Academy Charter School in Pleasantville, which expires June 30. The approved new Atlantic City Community Charter School has requested another planning year, and the Global Visions Charter School in Egg Harbor City has withdrawn its application. The Compass Academy Charter School in Vineland will open in September with grades kindergarten, first and second.

BILLINGS GAZETTE

April 6, 2012

Wyoming getting interest from charter schools

By: BOB MOEN

CHEYENNE — Wyoming is attracting a lot of interest from charter school organizations and needs to improve its charter school law to make sure such schools are of the highest quality, Kari Cline, executive director of the Wyoming Association of Public Charter Schools, said.

"The Wyoming association is getting calls almost on a weekly basis from groups who are interested in opening charter schools in Wyoming," Cline said.

They are being attracted by the state's strong financial backing of public schools and the fact that there are only a few charter schools currently operating in the state, she said.

However, Wyoming's current charter school law makes it difficult to establish charters in the state and at the same time leaves the door open for applications from "questionable organizations trying to start charter schools," she said.

"We don't really have great policy in place to ensure that what is coming is the best quality that we can get," Cline said.

Charters are public schools that typically receive a mixture of public and private money. They operate separately from regular public schools and are free of many regulations that govern traditional public schools in exchange for achieving promised results.

Wyoming has just three operating charter schools — two in Laramie, one in Fort Washakie — and one opening this year in Cheyenne.

National charter school and education reform advocates rate Wyoming's charter school law as among the worst in the nation because they say the law makes it difficult to open a charter school.

The Center for Education Reform recently gave Wyoming a "D" grade in charter school law.

"Full power to approve charter school applications lies with the school board, which is why to date there are only four charters in the state," the report said.

A report earlier this year from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools ranked Wyoming 34th for charter friendly state laws.

"Wyoming law sets forth minimum required elements for all charter applications, but they are very general and less substantial than the essential elements recommended," the NAPCS report said.

Attempts to change Wyoming's law to make it easier to open charter schools in the state failed in the 2011 state Legislature in part because of fears by some lawmakers that they will take students, and state money, away from the traditional public schools.

The Legislature this year approved one change in the charter law dealing with state financial aid but nothing that would make it any easier to establish a charter.

Cline said her association is planning another push for charter law reform next year.

"I think what we're after primarily is a different authorizing structure and the way that charters are held accountable, and their autonomy is ensured," she said. "So looking just to overall bring the kind of policy that encourages strong applicants and an authorizing structure that is not completely subject to a district's whims."

THE CINCINNATI ENQUIRER

April 29, 2012

Catholic schools report $15M deficit

ENQUIRER EXCLUSIVE:

Tuition rises as Cincinnati Archdiocese's system tries to avoid draining parishes

By Denise Smith Amos
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Two-thirds of the elementary schools in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati operated at a deficit last year, spending $1.15 for every $1 they raised, the archdiocese reported in its first-ever financial study.

At least 61 of 80 reporting grade schools had operating losses averaging about $239,000 each. The total shortfall for all 80 schools was $15 million. (Ten elementary schools and the 23 high schools were not in the report.)

Although the financial losses were mostly made up by parish and church donations, "You can't eat up your parish reserves forever; eventually those reserves dry up," said Jack Corey, principal of St. Antoninus in Covedale, which raised tuition for the next school year by $100, to $2,600.

Catholic leaders for more than a year have been grappling with a variety of strategies to improve Catholic schools' outlook. Among options under discussion:

» Creating ways all parishes – not just those with schools – can support Catholic education.

» Directing new funds to financial aid and scholarships, rather than to specific schools or parishes.

» Arming parishes with information so they can set tuition low enough to attract more students.

"We're facing some new challenges," said Jim Rigg, superintendent of the 113 schools and 42,200 students in the archdiocese. "It may become a crisis if we don't implement some type of strategic vision for the future."

Cincinnati's Catholic school challenges mirror national trends.

In the past decade, Cincinnati's Catholic school enrollment fell 25 percent, from 56,615 to 42,263, while the number of schools shrank from 136 to 113.

Since the 1960s, Catholic schools across the nation have lost more than half their enrollment and closed nearly half their schools. Most tuition-paying Catholic families have moved to suburbs and enrolled kids in public schools, while Catholic school tuition climbed as nuns left and lay teachers took their place.

In more recent years, charter schools, sex abuse scandals and the recession have dragged down enrollment and financial support.

The Cincinnati archdiocese, with its independent schools run mostly by parishes, is about 10,000 students larger than Cincinnati Public. Public districts facing double-digit deficits and falling enrollment typically slash costs, lay off staff, increase class sizes or close buildings.

Fears that some schools might close

But Catholic schools are a ministry, not a profit center, Rigg said. Parishes on average kick in 15 percent to 17 percent of school costs. Rigg wouldn't predict what recommendations will come out of an archdiocese-wide strategic plan, expected in August, but he said it won't recommend closings. That will be left up to parishes and their leaders.

"I'm confident there will not be widespread massive school closures, akin to what we've seen in a lot of places around the country," Rigg said. "We will be identifying regions of schools or areas around the schools where we need to begin conversations with the local leadership about the long-term viability of the schools in that area."

Elsewhere, mass school closings continue, with mixed results:

» In 2011, the Archdiocese of New York closed 32 schools to staunch a $22 million deficit.

» In January, Philadelphia's archdiocese planned to shutter 49 schools, but protests, appeals and monetary pledges saved 22. Two more schools await a Vatican reprieve.

» In March, the Vatican ordered 13 Cleveland parishes restored of 50 closed in recent years.

Cincinnati has had few schools close in recent years. The latest was Our Lady of Sacred Heart in Reading, which merged in 2010 with St. Nicholas Academy. The academy moved into Sacred Heart's building.

Catholic schools in Ohio get more state help than those in other states.

Ohio's Educational Choice scholarships, for instance, pay up to $4,250 in elementary tuition and up to $5,000 in high school tuition for a student who lives near or attends the worst-performing public schools. Last year 3,495 students used EdChoice vouchers at Cincinnati Catholic schools.

Ohio also partially funds non-religious, "auxiliary," services and resources, everything from speech therapists to computers, for private schools. And public districts bus students who attend private schools and receive partial reimbursement from the state.

Cushions for Catholic schools

In the Cincinnati archdiocese, the nonprofit Catholic Inner-city Schools Education Fund raises money for scholarships for needy students at nine inner-city Catholic elementary schools and at area Catholic high schools. The CISE-funded schools saw 11.7 percent enrollment growth in the past decade, while most other area Catholic elementary schools saw declines, the financial study showed.

Even with those supports, Rigg said, the archdiocese is looking at buying in bulk for all schools, creating a fundraising entity for scholarships and financial aid and pooling resources.

Historically, the schools most vulnerable to closure have been schools that help mostly low-income students, who often are non-Catholic.

That worries parents like Deb Coffey, a non-Catholic, Northside mother of 10 who sends two students to St. Boniface nearby and paid $50 a month and a one-time payment of $1,000, a fraction of St. Boniface's $4,500 cost per student.

Coffey hopes all parishes will eventually share in educating the poor, even if they don't have a parish school. "Those who have more should be sharing with those who have less," Coffey said. "That's biblical."

Of the 226 archdiocese parishes, 115 aren't linked to a school. Most of those parishes are rural.

There are discussions but few details ready for getting all parishes to help families afford tuition, said Greg Bell, a Mount Auburn businessman who co-chairs the financial task force. He has looked at fundraising efforts in Memphis and Chicago. "Consensus is a big word," he said. "I'm all for a unified vision and for unified support for Catholic schools, but I'm not for controversy or anything that will divide."

Some parishes can't afford to support schools and keep other mission priorities, said Virgil Harris, a retired pipefitter and pastoral council chair of the 300-family Holy Name of Jesus in Trenton, a Butler County parish without a school.

"When you look at all the things that parishes do other than education – and the revenue of the Church is down because of the economy – you wonder how much more people can afford to give," he said.

Holy Name gives at least 10 percent of its collection to charities, he said, and soon must hire an administrator because it will share its pastor next year, he said. Holy Name also pays partial tuition for parish teens who attend Catholic high schools.

It's better if people can see which families they're helping, Harris said.

It's also easier for some Catholics to support other Catholics rather than non-Catholics. A few people in archdiocese meetings complained that non-Catholics were getting more tuition help than some Catholics.

Although he doesn't subscribe to their views, the Rev. Jerry Hiland, pastor of four Clermont County parishes, explained that some feel it's an affront to the notion of Catholic identity.

"And for some people the Catholic school is supposed to be a nice, safe, middle-class school," he said.

Tuition challenges and family struggles

Yet some middle-class families struggle to afford private schools, Rigg said. That's why the archdiocese recently sent custom financial and demographic reports to each school principal and pastor, to help them set affordable tuition.

Local research shows that if schools increase tuition beyond 5 percent of a family's annual income, they stand a good chance of losing students, Rigg said.

That is good to know, said Hiland, whose St. Louis School set tuition at $3,050, just over the 5 percent figure for the average neighborhood family making $60,000 a year. "The question always comes up: At what point does a family feel like they're being pushed out of a Catholic education?" he said.

Rigg expects enrollment to stabilize for next year, judging from anecdotal evidence throughout the 19-county archdiocese. Rigg said the number of baptisms and Catholic preschools are up.

An Enquirer survey of Cincinnati-area Catholic schools in March and April showed a projected enrollment decline of 6 percent for next school year

Eighteen schools were holding tuition steady, while most others set increases of up to 3 percent. In recent years, average tuitions rose 2.3 percent.

St. Dominic in Delhi Township kept tuition at $2,875, said Principal Bill Cavanaugh, because parish support is up and its preschool and technology are feeding enrollment.

Meanwhile, Sts. Peter and Paul Academy, a 5-year-old, independent Catholic elementary of 86 students in Reading, will lower tuition by $200 to $2,190 next year, thanks to an anonymous donor. The school for the first time also will offer deep family discounts for multiple students.

Catholic schools should set tuition at their cost of education, and then award more financial aid, instead of subsidizing tuition with parish funds, said Patrick McCloskey, a project director at the Center for Catholic School Effectiveness at Loyola University in Chicago.

Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform in Washington, D.C., suggested Catholic schools share space with charter schools or other entities to raise funds. Rigg said leasing to outsiders may be counter to their mission.

McCloskey and Allen, nevertheless, praised Cincinnati's strategic planning.

"You may have to close schools, but you can do a whole host of things before you even have to start thinking about closing schools," Allen said.

MORNING SUN

May 21, 2012

John Engler honored by CMU charter schools

By MARK RANZENBERGER

Former Gov. John Engler said Monday at Central Michigan University that the choice given parents to send their children to charter schools was a key element in making Michigan's schools better.

CMU named its charter schools center the Gov. John Engler Center for Charter Schools in a ceremony Monday.

Engler said the combination of cross-district school choice and charter schools had broken what critics call the "monopoly" of district-based public schools, and Michigan children are getting better educations because of it.

"When you put the two of them together, you have more than a quarter-million kids exercising choice," Engler said.

Engler spent three terms as Michigan's governor, taking office in 1991. In 1993, he pushed through the state's first charter school law. Charter schools are public schools, but they don't have attendance boundaries, and they aren't bound by many of the rules that affect district-based schools.

Keynote speaker Jeanne Allen, the president of the Center for Education Reform, said entrenched public school interests fought charter schools every step of the way.

"Their livelihoods were based on adult interests," Allen said. "The words choice and accountability were fighting words."

Allen's group promotes vouchers, private scholarship programs, charter schools, cross-district school choice and tuition tax credits. She said Engler was able to overcome bitter and continuing opposition from education unions, and charter schools and school choice now are a permanent part of the educational landscape.

"John Engler saw the unions were a paper tiger," she said.

Allen called CMU "the gold standard in university authorizers" for the oversight and accountability it provides to the 56 schools it charters.

"Among Michigan's highest-performing charters, CMU dominates," Allen said.

Engler said that when the law was first enacted, no one really knew how a university would charter a school. He gave credit to former board of trustees members Sid Smith and James Fabiano, and former university presidents Arthur Ellis, Leonard Plachta and Michael Rao for starting the movement and keeping it going.

"The first 15 years were really about the right to exist," said James Goenner, president of the National Charter Schools Institute. Goenner noted that since parents choose charter schools, there is a strong incentive for them to provide good educations.

"We serve an extraordinary amount of underserved kids," said Mary Kay Shields, deputy director of the CMU charter operation. She said the schools usually take low-performing pupils and bring them up to state averages.

Former Sen. Dick Posthumus, now a senior adviser to Gov. Rick Snyder, said getting a good education to urban pupils was "maybe the biggest civil rights issue of this decade."

Doug Ross, the director of the charter schools office for the Detroit Public Schools, said his school district was chartering schools – and trying to create innovative teaching and learning environments within collective bargaining agreements.

Gov. Rick Snyder, who also attended the dedication ceremony, said the Legislature's recent action to lift the cap on the number of Michigan charter schools would lead to more innovation.

"Too much of our system became about money," Snyder said. "I think we've created an environment for success."

KOMO news.com

May 22, 2012

Wash. education groups file charter initiative

By DONNA GORDON BLANKINSHIP

SEATTLE (AP) - A coalition of Washington education groups on Tuesday filed a citizen initiative asking voters to allow 40 public charter schools in the state over the next five years.

The coalition including the League of Education Voters, Stand for Children and Democrats for Education Reform has until July 6 to collect nearly 250,000 valid voter signatures.

A spokesman for the coalition said the groups would use both paid and volunteer signature collectors to meet the July deadline. But first they need to jump a few administrative hoops. It could be several weeks before they will be able to print petition sheets and circulate them.

Charters are public schools that run independently from district controls, instead, they are governed by a multi-year performance contract that requires proof that a school is improving student achievement.

Washington voters have repeatedly rejected charter school initiatives.

Washington is one of eight states without charter schools, according to the Center for Education Reform, an advocacy group that supports charters. The other states are Alabama, Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and West Virginia.

Washington voters rejected initiatives calling for charter schools in 1996, 2000 and 2004. The Legislature rejected charter bills on several other occasions before they reached the ballot.

A charter school bill had hearings in both the Senate and the House but didn't make it very far during the 2012 Legislature.

Voters are ready to allow charter schools in Washington state, said Chris Korsmo, chief executive officer of the League of Education Voters.

"If we didn't think we could win, we wouldn't put it on the ballot," Korsmo said.

She said the proposal was written in a way to bring only the best ideas from other states to Washington, and charter schools that don't fulfill their mission would be shut down quickly.

Korsmo couldn't relate to people who are afraid of the potential impact of charter schools on Washington education.

"If bringing what works elsewhere here is scary for people, the status quo for a lot of kids is a far scarier thing," she said.

A number of lawmakers, from both political parties, are supporting the initiative.

"This initiative will finally bring Washington into the 21st century in terms of educational opportunities for public school students," said State Rep. Eric Pettigrew, D-Seattle, in a statement announcing the initiative.

The Washington Education Association, the state's largest teacher's union, came out with an immediate statement opposing the measure, saying that charter schools fail to meet the needs of most children.

The proposal would require charter schools to be authorized and overseen by a state charter school commission, or by a local school board.

They would be exempt from many state laws, but could only hire certified teachers and would need to comply with all civil rights and discrimination laws.

Priority would be given to charter schools that serve "at-risk" students from low-performing schools.

Only nonprofit groups would be welcome to open charter schools in Washington, but they would not be allowed to include religious instruction as part of their curriculum.

Chicago Tribune

June 1, 2012

Chicago Public Schools fight being studied across country

Teachers contract battle brought to center of national reform debate by mayor, advocates

By Noreen S. Ahmed-Ullah and Joel Hood
Tribune reporters

Mayor Rahm Emanuel's star power within the Democratic Party has put a national spotlight on the fight over the future of public schools in Chicago and attracted support from education reform groups eager to see how much change can be effected in a pro-labor city.

"The headlines from Chicago are emailed around to mayors and policymakers every morning," said Joe Williams, head of Washington,D.C.-based Democrats for Education Reform, a group started by Wall Street hedge fund managers. "I think people want to see what's possible, both politically and on the ground in schools and in communities."

Democrats for Education Reform and another major education organization, Oregon-based Stand for Children, have each established themselves in Chicago and are working to build backing for Emanuel's education agenda.

Last year, Stand for Children raised nearly $3.5 million to drive through groundbreaking education reform legislation in Illinois. Now, the group is using sophisticated telemarketing techniques and advertising to build a strong base of parental support for many of the changes sought by Chicago Public Schools.

Democrats for Education Reform came to town about four months ago to convince Democratic politicians to get behind educational reform, even if it runs counter to their traditional allegiance to labor.

The two reform groups are playing a role in an increasingly heated fray, and last week held a joint news conference to lambaste the Chicago Teachers Union for threatening a strike while talks are ongoing. The same day, 5,000 teachers rallied in and around the Auditorium Theatre, shouting "fight" and "strike" and booing every mention of Emanuel before taking to the streets in a march led by CTU President Karen Lewis and the Rev. Jesse Jackson.

While a Tribune/WGN poll released last month showed a majority of Chicago voters, especially CPS parents, side with the union over the mayor on overall attempts to improve education, the union's organized opposition is formidable.

Stand for Children's local efforts are being bankrolled by wealthy and politically powerful Chicagoans, many of whom have influence within the district. For example, Bruce Rauner, a venture capitalist who played a key role in bringing Stand for Children to Chicago, met with CPS officials 13 times over nine months as new chief Jean-Claude Brizard's team was shaping policy, CPS records show.

Efforts to advance the growth of charter schools or attack teacher tenure have gone further in other cities, but what draws national interest to Chicago is that the moves are being led by Emanuel, President Barack Obama's former chief of staff, education experts said.

"The mayor's candid disdain for the current teacher union contracts is attractive to most reformers, and they equate tough talk with tough action," said Jeanne Allen, president of the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Education Reform.

"He's been clear that notions like ironclad tenure and seniority should not be a proxy for a teacher's performance," Allen said. "Obviously the unions around the country don't want to believe one of their own has turned on them and might actually challenge their power."

Stand for Children, which claims to have a roster of more than 4,300 parents backing its agenda, hosted telephonic town hall meetings with Brizard in January and March. Organizers said more than 13,000 people participated.

Both groups are using petitions, advertising and articles in newspaper op-ed pages to push their proposals.

The CTU isn't without allies as it fights to hold on to gains from years past regarding class size, pay and benefits. For the union, as for the reformers, Emanuel's ties to Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan give the struggle national significance. The CTU's rally last week was attended by

The Courier-Journal

June 2, 2012

Idaho school touts patriotism

Academy part of charter system

By Jessie L. Bonner
Associated Press

GOODING, Idaho — At North Valley Academy in the heart of Idaho's dairy country, a typical school day might seem like an over-the-top Fourth of July celebration elsewhere.

The public charter school in Gooding touts itself as a "patriotic" choice for parents, with a focus on individual freedoms and free-market capitalism. "We teach something about patriotism every single day," said principal Cheri Vitek. "Every day in their classroom (students are) singing 'proud to be an American' and if they're not singing 'proud to be an American,' they're singing another song about America."

True enough. On this day, neat rows of students wearing their red, white and blue uniforms belted out "God bless the USA" in the school cafeteria.

North Valley Academy's patriotism emphasis is a first for Idaho, but a number of charter schools nationally focus on similar concepts, said Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform, a Washington, D.C.-based school choice advocate. The schools may not all present or teach in the same way, Allen said, but many "believe traditional schools have neglected teaching the importance of our nation's history, its free-market system."

North Valley Academy includes K-12th grades and was approved by the Idaho Public Charter School Commission in 2008. It opened amid some outcry from Gooding's traditional public school system, but not because of the new school's curriculum.

The local district lost roughly 10 percent of its total enrollment to the new charter school that first year — along with the funding that went with it — and the town of about 3,500 suddenly had two groups of students: Those who wear uniforms and those who don't.

School founder Deby Infanger is planning a second patriotic-themed charter school in Idaho Falls, and Frank VanderSloot, a national campaign finance co-chair for Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney, has offered to donate use of a property and refurbish a building to house the new school, Infanger said.

Charter schools invite scrutiny when they focus on concepts that may be viewed as political, said Monica Hopkins, director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Idaho.

Students at North Valley Academy in Gooding, Idaho, say the Pledge of Allegiance May 7 at morning assembly. AP

THE GRAND RAPIDS
PRESS

June 24, 2012

Charter school special ed report blasted

BY DAVE MURRAY
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GRAND RAPIDS — Charter schools serve fewer special education students than traditional schools, according to the Government Accountability Office, although Michigan educators said countywide, specialized programs and parental choices likely produce the difference.

The federal report released this week indicated that about 8 percent of the students in charter schools nationally are disabled or require special services. That's compared to 11 percent of the students in traditional schools. Data is from the 2009-10 school year.

The GAO recommends that U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan "take measures to help charter schools recognize practices that may affect enrollment of students with disabilities" by updating existing directives and researching why the levels are different.

But the leader of a school choice advocacy group said the GAO's report is incomplete and flawed. Allen noted there are 5,700 charter schools in the country, and GAO staff visited 13.

"GAO's attempt to draw conclusions about enrollment of students with special needs in charter schools was a waste of resources," said Jeanne Allen, president of The Center for Education Reform.

"The GAO report, by the agency's own admission, fails to meet fundamental and rudimentary research standards. It is based wholly on anecdotal snapshots of a limited number of schools and states."

The federal agency indicated it prepared the report after being asked about the enrollment differences, how charter schools reach out to students with disabilities and what services the schools provide.

The GAO also considered the role federal and state education departments play in overseeing the schools and their special needs programs.

"Charter schools enrolled a lower percentage of students with disabilities than traditional districts, but little is known about the factors that contributed to these differences," the report reads.

The report considers that charter schools are schools of choice, and it is possible that parents of disabled students opt to send their children elsewhere.

"In addition, some charter schools may be discouraging students with disabilities from enrolling," the document says.

The GAO notes that traditional schools often play a role in placing students with disabilities, and the districts — not the charter — decide whether the students are better served in a different program.

The agency reported most of the 13 charter schools visited publicized and offered special education services, "but faced challenges serving students with severe disabilities," including limited resource.

The Kent Intermediate School District has heard few complaints from special needs parents about charter schools, Assistant Superintendent Ronald Koehler said.

The KISD, which services districts in the Grand Rapids area, operates two schools for students with severe special needs including students from all 20 districts. Some charter schools — like the districts — pay tuition to send students to the programs.

"I think a fair amount of the difference is self-selection among the special needs parents," he said. "They get connected early on, and they find the best options for their children. And they know that if they sent their children to a charter school, they'd end up back in our specialized programs anyway."

Grand Valley State University authorizes 47 charter schools, and 9.6 percent of the students enrolled in GVSU charters have individualized education plans for special needs.

Robert Kimball, senior director of operations and policy, said the charter school office works to make sure charter schools comply with state laws. Kimball said he knows of one parental complaint in three years, and the matter was resolved through the KISD.

"Charter schools are open enrollment and must follow the laws like any other public school," he said. "When we get a complaint, we take it very seriously. From our perspective, there is no wiggle room."

Allen noted the GAO report has no comprehensive data to support its conclusions. She said the center's survey, used by federal agencies and research organizations, showed 15 percent of all charter school students have special needs.

"This is an issue that deserves in-depth analysis of real data on real students, and there are many valid ways GAO could have studied and learned from public school models," Allen said. "That's not what GAO did. We urge Congress to investigate the activities surrounding this report, and issue a reprimand for misusing government resources on a fool's errand."

The Washington Post

July 19, 2012

Charter schools: Can they send more kids to college?

By HAYAT NORIMINE

Voters will again decide this year whether they think charter schools can improve high-school education in Washington state.

The issue comes before the voters at a critical time in Washington's economic future. Washington's demand for well-educated employees grows with the competing job market, but the state isn't producing the number of college graduates it needs. The question is whether charter schools could help to close that gap.

On July 6, education groups presented their petition to have Initiative 1240 added to the November ballot.

The petition had about 350,000 signatures, well above the required 241,153 signatures to put Initiative 1240 on the ballot. Charter schools are currently banned from nine states, including Washington, and the initiative would create 40 charter schools in Washington state over the course of five years.

Washington voters have rejected charter schools three times before -- in 1996, 2000 and a third time in 2004.

The state would fund charter schools, which would be independent public schools. But local school districts wouldn't oversee them.

That provides flexibility for the schools' choice in curriculum and teaching, but opponents of charter schools say the district regulations keep public schools accountable.

Kara Kerwin, Vice President of External Affairs for The Center of Education Reform, believes charter schools can give an education other public schools can't offer with the regulations that school districts have in place.

What's important to both opponents and proponents of the initiative is whether charter schools can offer higher success rates for high-school students, and a large part of that means the schools' ability to send high-school students to college.

University of Pennsylvania's State Review Project, published last January by education professors, revealed that while Washington state attracts well-educated leaders, the state itself is not producing as many bachelor's degrees as the state needs, calling Washington a "leadership vacuum." And the review projects that 67 percent of jobs in Washington will require higher-education degrees by 2018.

Pretty cumbersome sentence. So the state needs to send more kids to college. Will charter schools help do that?

"I think Washington needs an education reform," said Paul Hill, founder of the Center for Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) and professor at the University of Washington Bothell. "We definitely need to be open to how to use technology and open to new ways of motivating students. ... [Charter schools are] a decent way to protect kids and protect state money, and at the same time give opportunity for innovation that we blocked up until now."

Washington's problem with producing more college graduates fundamentally lies with getting high-school students access to higher education. Once high schoolers have access, Washington's overall retention rate for colleges and universities is much higher than the national average.

Getting high-school students on track for college is the challenging part.

"Improving students' academic readiness for college is an important part of improving bachelor's degree production," Laura Perna, researcher for the State Review Project and professor of education in the University of Pennsylvania, said in an email. "The high school is clearly a critical part of the process of enrolling and succeeding in college for traditional-age students."

The Free Lance-Star

August 17, 2012

Rigorous charter school joins area

WASHINGTON, D.C., WILL TRY CURRICULUM USED BY PRIVATE COMPANY AT EIGHT OTHER SCHOOLS

BY OLGA KHAZAN
THE WASHINGTON POST

WASHINGTON — Most school leaders say they strive to reach high standards. A public charter school has arrived in the District with a distinctive brand of academic rigor.

Sixth-graders at the school, Basis D.C., take physics and Latin. Fifth-graders read "Beowulf." After they wrap up their minimum six Advanced Placement classes, Basis high school students can tackle organic chemistry and game theory.

The D.C. branch of Basis starts Aug. 27. This week, students are being drilled in study skills, reading and math in the school's new Penn Quarter building as part of a voluntary two-week boot camp.

In a math prep session, teacher Robert Biemesderfer gave a class of mostly fifth- and sixth-graders 15 seconds to complete a row of multiplication problems. Mental math ability, Biemesderfer said, atrophies over the summer. "And by the way," he said, "can anyone tell me what 'atrophy' means?"

Behind him, a PowerPoint slide read "Nothing halfway," which is a Basis aphorism, along with "It's cool to be smart" and "Walk with purpose."

The two-week program aims to prepare students to perform at the level of their counterparts in Arizona, where Basis began. There, school officials say, a high share of graduates score high enough on tests to be ranked as "AP Scholars With Distinction" and many are National Merit scholars.

"I like the way they teach; it's interactive," said Annadora Garner, a rising fifth-grader. "Some of the math is hard, but I think it will get easier."

Mary Siddall, a Basis mom who spearheaded the effort to bring the school to the District, said everything is hard at Basis.

"We believe everything that's worth achieving requires hard work," Siddall said.

Basis was launched in 1998 in Tucson by educators Olga and Michael Block, who believed a traditional middle school curriculum wasn't strong enough for their daughter. Basis has eight campuses in Arizona; those in Tucson and Scottsdale are ranked among the nation's most challenging.

The Blocks and other Basis advocates say the schools show how to help U.S. students catch up to those in high-performing countries such as Finland and South Korea.

Basis students who don't pass a comprehensive exam at the end of each year are required to repeat the grade. Teachers receive bonuses for each student who gets a 4 or 5, the top score, on an AP test.

The school hires teachers who have advanced degrees in their field but not necessarily a teaching license. The Blocks chose the District in part because the city does not require public charter school teachers to have a D.C. teaching license.

Of course, Basis doesn't have a monopoly on high standards. Plenty of regular and charter schools aim to stretch students academically. But Basis is known for a teaching style that stresses hard work and depth of knowledge.

"There's a tendency in education that we somehow have to make it entertaining for kids," said Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform, a D.C. group that advocates school choice. "The Basis philosophy is that it can be exhilarating to learn a great amount of knowledge."

Basis D.C. was initially met with skepticism. When the school's founders first applied, staff members and consultants for the D.C. Public Charter School Board worried that the school would not be able to meet the needs of "low-performing, English-language learners and special education students." Fewer than half the students in regular D.C. public schools are grade-level proficient in math or reading. Charter schools must accept all students, and if there is more interest than seats available, children are admitted by lottery.

"If you have a lottery, as we do, you have no idea what sort of population you're going to get," charter board member John H. McKoy said. "You don't know if they're going to be prepared." McKoy, the only board member to vote against Basis, said he now supports the school.

Siddall and the Blocks have won over many skeptics. They had more than 60 information sessions for parents in every corner of the city. From February to June, they offered three hours of

Chicago Tribune

September 11, 2012

Job security at heart of 2 stumbling blocks

School reformers don't see recall policy, evaluations the same way teachers do

By BILL RUTHHART AND DIANE RADO

Two issues being cited as primary stumbling blocks to a Chicago teachers contract are a recall policy for teachers and a teacher evaluation system. Both affect job security for teachers and are part of larger efforts to overhaul schools in the city and nationally.

TEACHER RECALL POLICY

The Chicago Teachers Union is pushing hard for a procedure to recall teachers who have been laid off because of school closings, consolidations and turnarounds. The issue is of critical importance, the union has said, because of rumors that the district plans to close as many as 100 schools in coming years.

Earlier this year, CPS and the union struck a deal over the longer school day that temporarily allowed for such a recall. In exchange for the union agreeing to an extra 30 minutes in high schools and 75 minutes in elementary schools, CPS agreed to rehire nearly 500 teachers in noncore subjects from a pool of teachers who had been laid off.

The district, however, has resisted making such a recall policy the permanent method for filling vacancies in Chicago schools.

"Teachers in this city agreed to a longer day … and what our union got in return for that was a promise there would be a recall procedure for those teachers who are going to be hired," said Jesse Sharkey, vice president of CTU. "Now we see that offer is being taken away from the table, and there is no sign of respect there. That's important for our members."

Mayor Rahm Emanuel has framed the issue as one of accountability, saying he doesn't want to place the district's hiring control in the hands of the union through such a recall process.

"I don't believe I should pick 'em. I don't believe CPS should pick 'em. I don't believe the CTU leadership should pick 'em," Emanuel said Monday of hiring teachers. "If we're going to hold our local principals in the school accountable for getting the results we need, they need to pick the best qualified."

In the district's latest proposal, CPS teachers whose schools are closed would be eligible for vacancies at the school that takes in the transferred students. If there are no vacancies, the teachers would have three options: a three-month lump-sum severance, five months in a "reassigned teacher pool" or a spot in a "quality teacher force pool," which would entitle those teachers to an interview and an explanation if they are not hired.

The CPS offer also provides options for teachers displaced for other reasons, including turnarounds or phaseouts.

Jeanne Allen, president of the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Education Reform, said recall policies do not encourage improvement or change within school districts but rather a status quo that has never led to improvement in educating children.

But the teachers union has countered that its members deserve as much job security as possible, especially with school closings becoming increasingly common.

"In Chicago, there are many good teachers who work in some of the toughest schools in the city, who saw their schools close through no fault of their own," Sharkey said.

TEACHER RATINGS

Teacher contract negotiations often come down to money and benefits, so parents might be wondering how employee evaluations became a stumbling block in the Chicago Public Schools teacher strike.

The wrangling has to do with a new teacher rating system pushed by the Obama administration, which has sparked new laws and controversy in Illinois and around the country.

The new evaluations judge teachers in part on how their students perform, with a focus on academic gains. Teachers say that isn't fair for a lot of reasons and that bad ratings resulting from the new system could threaten teachers' livelihoods.

CTU President Karen Lewis estimates that almost 6,000 teachers could be discharged in the coming years — nearly 30 percent of union membership. "That is unacceptable and leads to instability for our students," she said.

But supporters of the new system — created under a 2010 Illinois law — say it's good for students and a way to ensure that the best teachers are in America's schools.

"I think there is unbelievably strong momentum not only locally but nationally that the time has come to have more substantive evaluations," said Robin Steans, executive director of the policy group Advance Illinois, which has been instrumental in pushing education reforms.

Steans said a great deal of effort went into negotiating the 2010 law and that the CTU was at the table — though not Lewis, because she wasn't union president at the time.

The law required CPS to jump-start the new evaluation system this fall in at least 300 schools, though most suburban school districts were not required to put the program in place until 2016-17.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

October 12, 2012

SCHOOL AMENDMENT

Charter sparks similar battles

Advocates watching Georgia, Washington.

Supporters cite choice, foes cite scarce educational resources.

By Wayne Washington
wwashington@ajc.com

SEATTLE — On a recent fall day here, Melissa Westbrook and Shannon Campion settled into high chairs behind a small table in the basement studio at cavernous Seattle City Hall.

They had come to debate charter schools, and while television cameras rolled, each woman attempted to pummel the other with what she saw as the wrong-headedness of her opponent's position. "You want to spend public dollars on things that work," Westbrook said. "Charters are unproven."

Campion stuck up for charter schools and then likened Westbrook to the replacement referees who drew scorn from National Football League fans for bad calls. "Your intentions are good," Campion told Westbrook with a wry smile, "but you're all wrong." On and on it went.

Charter schools are a hot topic in Washington because this fall its voters will determine the fate of an initiative that would establish charter schools in the state.

Westbrook and Campion's debate took place almost 2,700 miles from metro Atlanta. Listeners in the Peach State, however, would have been familiar with its dueling themes because they are the same ones being used in Georgia, where voters will consider an amendment to the state constitution that would underscore the state's power to authorize charter schools and establish a commission to handle applications for them.

Washington's initiative would establish charter schools there for the first time, and Georgia's amendment could lead to more charter schools. Both are being watched closely by charter school advocates across the country, who have ridden a 20-year wave that has seen 41 states pass pro-charter school laws.

Next month, voters in Washington and Georgia will determine if that wave has crested or still rises.

Old argument, new money

The argument over charter schools in Washington is as evergreen as the giant trees that crowd the mountainous landscape of the Pacific Northwest.

For the fourth time in the past decade and a half, Washington voters will be asked this fall if they want charter schools in their state.

Three times before, Washington voters said 'No.'

Georgia, on the other hand, has had charter schools for 17 years.

Charter schools are public schools granted flexibility as they pursue specific education goals laid out in their charter, or contract, with either the state or the local school district. Supporters of charter schools say they could help close the gap in academic performance between minority and non-minority students, decrease dropouts, and force traditional public schools to improve because unsatisfied parents would have an alternative: charter schools.

The Washington initiative, 1240, would allow the establishment of eight charter schools a year for five years. Georgia's amendment would cement the state's authority to create charter schools and establish a commission to consider applications for them.

Charter schools are not on the ballot in any other state, and advocates are zeroing in on Washington and Georgia in their quest to see the measures approved.

Some of the richest people in America have thrown their financial might behind the push to establish charter schools in Washington. People like Microsoft co-founders Bill Gates and Paul Allen. And Wal-Mart heiress Alice Walton, who gave $$1.7 million to the pro-charter push in Washington and $250,000 to one of the groups supporting the proposed amendment in Georgia.

Of the $8.2 million raised in support of the Washington initiative, $6.7 million has come from five people, disclosure forms show. Gates himself has donated $3 million.

While only a handful of people have contributed the lion's share of the money that supports the Washington initiative, out-of-state money is fueling the amendment in Georgia.

Fear about funding

Opponents see that money as proof that the push for charter schools has less to do with improving education and more about cashing in on education.

"Follow the money," said Jane Langley, campaign director for votesmartgeorgia.com, a group that opposes the amendment.

Opponents of the initiative in Washington and the amendment in Georgia both argue that more charter schools will mean less money for traditional public schools. Georgia Schools Superintendent John Barge said the price tag in Georgia could reach $430 million over the next five years if the state approves seven new charter schools each year during that period.

Barge cited that figure in coming out against the amendment.

Earlier this year in Washington, the state Supreme Court ruled that state has failed to provide adequate funding to schools.

"Right now, our schools are underfunded," said Sandi Strong, a health counselor in Tacoma who has two school-age children. "There is really not a good reason for adding 40 new schools to an already underfunded system."

State legislators in New Hampshire have imposed a moratorium on new charter schools, citing an absence of funding for them.

Jeanne Allen, executive director of the Center for Education Reform, which supports giving parents alternatives to traditional public school, said what happened in New Hampshire wasn't about money.

"New Hampshire has a moratorium because New Hampshire politicians are afraid of the education establishment," Allen said.

Charter schools are often opposed by traditional school officials because they feel threatened by them, Allen said.

News~Sentinel.com

November 30, 2012

Charter schools represent another valid option for parents to consider

By JONATHAN RAY

Research suggests that neighborhood schools are valued highly by urban residents and represent an important part of neighborhood identity.

Thurgood Marshall Leadership Academy is a neighborhood school right here in our community building a new sense of pride, culture and identity. Thurgood Marshall Leadership Academy is a charter school located at 2310 Weisser Park Ave.that is an independent public school able to provide more innovation and flexibility than conventional public schools can.

The charter is held by the Fort Wayne Urban League, and we are sponsored by the Indiana Charter Board.

Our educational role is to simply offer parents an educational option. It is important to remember that charter schools educate a higher concentration of at-risk and disadvantaged students, which makes comparing charters to traditional public schools look bad in a simple comparison.

However, according to the Center for Education Reform (2012 National Center for Policy Analysis):

“Charter schools are smaller than conventional public schools and serve a disproportionate and increasing number of poor and minority students.

“However, test scores at charter schools are ‘rising sharply’ and out-gaining conventional schools.

“Charter school students are more likely to be proficient in reading and math than students in neighboring conventional schools, achieving the greatest gains among African-American, Hispanic and low-income students.

“Charter schools that have been open for years boast even higher achievement rates; a Harvard University study found charter schools that have operated for more than five years outpace conventional schools by as much as 15 percent.”

Thurgood Marshall Leadership Academy and the Fort Wayne Urban League want to build neighborhoods and a strong community today’s urban generation can identify with.

We have good teachers and a caring and dedicated administrative team. A charter school simply represents another educational option for parents to consider. One size does not fit all in life or in getting a good quality education.

THE TENNESSEAN

January 3, 2013

Charters that fail must pay the price

When the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools Board voted in mid-November to close Smithson-Craighead Middle School at the end of the current academic year, the decision angered parents and generated pleas for patience. This despite the fact that the charter school had been warned over several years that it needed to improve its performance or risk closure.

The most recent TCAP scores showed that only 7.6 percent of Smithson-Craighead students were proficient in math and only 17.6 percent in reading. These abysmal scores were far below those of other Nashville charter and public schools.

Nationally, the data on charter school closings have been mixed. One report from the Center for Education Reform indicated that 15 percent of the 6,700 charters opened over the past 20 years have closed. However, less than a fifth of these closed because of poor academic performance. Most were closed because of financial problems or mismanagement.

And charter school closures are down, according to the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA). The association observed a three-year decline in the percentage of charters closed at the time of charter renewal with 6.2 percent being closed in 2010-2011. However, the association cautioned that there could be several reasons for the decline, including improvement in school quality.

Critics who believe that charters are too slow to close might bear in mind another study, by Peabody alumnus David A. Stuit for the Fordham Foundation, that showed that poorly performing charters are much more likely to be closed than poorly performing public schools.

Signs also suggest that more charters may be closed in the years to come. In the fall, NACSA launched its One Million Lives campaign to strengthen charter school standards. It plans to work with authorizers, policymakers, legislators and charter school operators to close failing charter schools while opening new ones and enrolling many more children. In the face of evidence that most charter schools are neither better nor worse than their public school peers, NACSA hopes to help the charter school movement do a better job of policing itself and improving academic performance. The organization estimates between 900 and 1,300 charter schools are performing in the lowest 15 percent of schools in their states.

In the end, performance should be at the heart of the question of whether to continue or close a charter school. This means looking closely at student achievement on a school-by-school basis. Unfortunately, Smithson-Craighead Middle School did not withstand close scrutiny. MNPS was right to make the decision early enough in the year to allow parents to make other plans for their children.

Parents, politicians and other charter school advocates need to remember that charters have always been experimental in nature. In exchange for public funding and operational latitude, charters promise innovation and academic success. When that success is not forthcoming, the experiment must come to a close.

Camilla P. Benbow is Patricia and Rodes Hart Dean of Education and Human Development

LEADER TIMES

January 17, 2013

Some school districts turn to advertising

Internet, television add motivation to fight charter school push

BY **DAVEEN RAE KURUTZ**

Western Pennsylvania school districts that are losing students and money to charter schools are fighting back.

The Penn Hills school board this week approved spending $3,500 a month for two years of advertising on TV and the Internet. Thirty-second ads will promote the Penn Hills Senior High School that opened last month.

The neighboring Woodland Hills school board is considering a $13,000 contract to develop infomercials to air on public access television.

Districts traditionally have not advertised schools but their charter-school counterparts have, as they attract a growing number of students.

Woodland Hills will pay $13.9 million — nearly 17 percent of its annual budget — to charter schools this year to educate more than 1,150 children who live in the district, the most students

CHARTER · A4

among 49 suburban districts the Tribune-Review surveyed. About 22 percent of eligible students there go to charter schools. Penn Hills is sending 787 students to charter schools at a cost of $8.1 million.

"It's cost us personnel. It's cost us programs," said Tara Reis, a Woodland Hills board member and parent. "When you see these kinds of numbers, it's staggering. That's why we don't have reading specialists or an after-school tutoring program or pre-K programs anymore."

Since the Legislature approved charter schools in 1997, 175 have opened statewide. Sixteen are online only. The charters are privately operated but funded by tuition payments from districts.

Supporters say they offer a better education than traditional public schools.

"I feel like a charter school gives us public education with a private school feel," said Ivelisse Torres of Penn Hills, whose daughter, Chloe, attends first grade at Imagine Penn Hills Charter School of Entrepreneurship, which opened in 2012.

Districts such as Woodland Hills are fighting reputations for low test scores and violence.

"The parent perspective is that the environment (in the school district) isn't conducive for the child," said Bob Fayfich, executive director of the Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools. "There's violence in the school, not a focus on learning."

Reis said Woodland Hills needs to highlight that the district and high school met minimum test score levels. Its infomercials would include a five-minute piece outlining positive things happening in the district; two one-minute spots sharing student experiences and alumni perspectives; and several 30-second ads themed "Woodland Hills ... where diversity works."

Butch Santicola, spokesman for the Pennsylvania State Education Association, the state's largest public teachers' union, said districts "have sat back and been in defensive mode."

"Charter schools are a game changer, no doubt," said Joseph Domaracki, interim associate dean of the College of Educational Technology at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. "Public schools have to do more to maintain their populations. It's a reality."

Districts responded slowly. Some started cyber programs.

A group of Westmoreland County districts offers courses through e-Academy, a cyber program the Intermediate Unit created. About 600 students participate, including 30 at Norwin's Center for 21st Century Learners. Some take traditional and cyber classes, said Tracy McNelly, Norwin's assistant superintendent of secondary education.

"What districts are seeing is that it's sort of stopping the bleeding," said Allie Arendas, distance learning specialist for Westmoreland Intermediate Unit.

This year at Quaker Valley schools in the Sewickley area, more students enrolled in the district's QV e-Learning program than in charter schools.

"I don't know that I have a crystal ball, but competition and choice seem to be the rule of the day," said Quaker Valley Superintendent Joseph Clapper. "Public school districts, in my opinion, shouldn't shy away from that."

Districts asked state lawmakers for help. A bill to create a commission to study charter school funding passed the Senate but stalled in the House last year.

Sen. Jim Brewster, D-McKeesport, who publicly supported Propel Schools, acknowledged problems with the charter concept because charters siphon money from public districts.

"Right now, it's a feeding frenzy," he said.

Melissa Hart, a lawyer who as a state senator was among sponsors of the charter school law, said she's pleased with their development.

"For some kids, the charters have been a real savior in some areas," Hart said, noting that "no piece of legislation is perfect."

"I'm happy ... that parents and families have more freedom on where to send kids without having to pay to send them somewhere. I think that's a good thing."

Grading schools

More than 2 million U.S. students attend more than 6,000 public charter schools, according to the Center for Education Reform in Washington.

Its 14th annual Charter School Laws Across the States Ranking and Scorecard concludes that fewer than half of the states can meet the demand for charter schools and state laws must improve to ensure growth and sustainability.

The report ranks Pennsylvania 14th in the nation, giving its law a B grade. Among the nation's 43 charter school laws, the center gave four As, nine Bs, 19 Cs, and Ds or Fs to the remaining 11 states.

The center evaluates charter school laws based on their construction and implementation, and whether they ensure quality learning opportunities. To read more: http://www.edreform.com/in-the-states.

The Salt Lake Tribune

January 18, 2013

UTAH PRAISED FOR ABUNDANCE OF CHARTER SCHOOL OPTIONS

Education » Utah's charter education system receives a "B" from D.C. nonprofit.

BY RAY PARKER

Utah ranks 11th in the nation when it comes to charter school programs, according to a new national study.

The Beehive State earned an overall "B" grade in charter education, according to the Center for Education Reform, a pro-charter Washington, D.C., nonprofit.

The group's latest evaluation of states' charter laws includes other categories deemed important for education reform: parental choice, online learning, teacher quality and transparency.

"These are the hot-button issues in education reform today," Jeanne Allen, the center's president, said Thursday. "We've been ranking charter schools for 14 years."

Still, there is one area the group does not specifically look at that's of interest in Utah: graduation rates.

Recently, Utah education officials looked at charter high school graduation rates, which ranked among the highest and lowest in the state: from 27 percent to 100 percent. The overall state graduation rate is 78 percent.

State officials said charter schools need to do a better job of tracking students if they leave the school before graduating. The students could have graduated at another school, but were posted as not graduating from their charter schools.

Allen said the same problem exists on a national level.

"We don't have a level playing field as far as data," Allen said. "Are charter schools doing poorly because they're doing poorly or because of the [inadequate] data?"

The center has studied and evaluated each state's charter school laws since 1996.

In its latest evaluation, the center had mostly positive comments about Utah in four of its five categories.

In its latest evaluation, the center had mostly positive comments about Utah in four of its five categories.

Under "charter schools," center officials wrote of the state on its website: "Utah's charter school law is considered strong because it provides equitable funding to charter schools, facilities funding and a strong authorizing system that includes capable independent bodies such as universities and the semi-independent state charter board."

As for "school choice," center officials wrote: "Utah has one private school choice program [special-needs vouchers]. The state does have a charter school law. Utah allows for limited public virtual schooling. Open enrollment exists, both for intradistrict and interdistrict public school choice."

The group praised the state's online learning: "Due in large part to the leadership of the Utah Legislature, Utah has adopted multiple student-centric policies designed specifically to harness the power of technology.

Primarily through the passage of SB65, the Statewide Online Education Program, and charter policy enacted over the last decade, digital learning has become available in some form to all Utah students."

Its "transparency" also was praised: "Utah has a very parent-friendly website that provides easy to understand school report cards as well as information on the Carson Smith Special Needs Scholarship and charter schools. The 40 local school boards in Utah are elected during the November general election."

But when it comes to "teacher evaluations," the group said Utah has some work to do. "Neither tenure decisions nor license advancement and renewal are based on effectiveness," the group wrote. "Eligibility for dismissal is not a consequence of multiple unsatisfactory evaluations in Utah, and ineffective classroom performance is not a ground for dismissal. The state does not ensure that the appeals process for dismissed teachers is expedient; however, a last hired, first fired policy is prohibited during layoffs."

Among the nation's 43 states with charter school laws, the center ranked them as follows: four states earned an "A," nine got a "B," 19 received a "C" and 11 states were given a "D" or "F."

Allen said it's not only charter school laws but the other four categories that make for education reform.

"As policymakers consider changes to their charter school laws, they also need to be mindful of what it takes to have truly great education reform policies across all issues," Allen said.

The center's 2013 Charter School Laws Across the States Ranking & Scorecard can be found at Edreform.com/in-the-states, which will be available to the public Tuesday.

"Charter and traditional schools don't have to be on opposite sides anymore," said Kim Frank, of the Utah Charter Network. "The main reason to see charter schools in Utah grow is you have smaller schools. And with new and innovative programs, that information can be shared with all schools, and all ships rise."

THE MISSISSIPPI PRESS

January 18, 2013

Senate OKs expanded charter school bill

Focus now on House to introduce its version

Jeff Amy
Associated Press

A bill to expand charter schools in Mississippi easily cleared the Senate on Wednesday, and attention shifts to the House for the second year.

In a 31-17 vote, the bill had two Democratic supporters but no Republican opponents. The vote came after more than three hours of debate and a day after Senate Bill 2189 was introduced and passed by the Senate Education Committee.

Charter schools are public schools that agree to meet certain standards in exchange for freedom from regulations. Mississippi has a charter school law that allows a small number of existing schools to convert to charters, but none have done so.

Wednesday, the Center for Education Reform, a pro-charter group based in Washington, D.C., called Mississippi's existing law the "worst charter law in the country."

Proponents say charter schools can improve achievement in Mississippi. "I think more than anything this is about closing the achievement gap in our state," said Senate Education Committee Chairman Gray Tollison. The Oxford Republican wrote SB 2189.

Opponents, though, fear charters will weaken traditional schools by skimming motivated students and money. "The overriding concern is what is going to happen to school districts when you start separating students out," said Sen. Hob Bryan, D-Amory.

A seven-member board would approve charter schools and oversee them, with three members appointed by the governor, three members appointed by the lieutenant governor and one member appointed by the state superintendent.

The bill would give districts rated "A" or "B" a veto over whether charters can locate there, while "C" and lower-rated districts wouldn't get a veto. Students would be allowed to cross district lines to enroll in charter schools, and a local tax contribution from the home district would go with charter students, as well as state aid.

No House bills regarding charter schools had yet been introduced as of Wednesday evening. But many House members favor allowing C-rated districts to have vetoes as well, and House Speaker Philip Gunn, R-Clinton, has said the House bill will be limited to 15 charters a year.

Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves, also a Republican, fought to deny vetoes to C districts last year. He said after the vote Wednesday it is important to have a law "that allows for the largest number of students possible having a public charter school option."

But he didn't rule out a compromise.

Supporters Wednesday included two black Democrats, Sampson Jackson of Preston and Willie Simmons of Cleveland. Simmons said Tollison made changes that won his vote.

He said the charter school law might dovetail with Simmons' proposal to create a model school in Sunflower County to bolster parent involvement and social services for students.

"It will give them an option at the local level if they desire to utilize the charter school option," Simmons said after the vote.

Among the changes made by Tollison between 2012 and 2013:

- Requiring applicants to show evidence of "adequate" community support and to analyze the impact on other public and private schools in an area.
- Explicitly banning private school conversions or new charter schools created by private school groups
- Requiring charters to serve a proportion of underserved students at least 80 percent as large as the share of underserved students in the charter's home district. The bill defines underserved as students with low family incomes, poor academic performance, special education needs or limited fluency in English.
- Ordering that the authorizing board must close a charter school if it is rated "F" for two consecutive years or if the school's performance is the bottom 20 percent of all schools statewide when the five-year contract runs out. Charters could get reprieves for "exceptional" circumstances.
- Requiring 75 percent of teachers to be certified, and the remaining quarter to earn certification within three years. Last year, the Senate bill required only 50 percent of teachers to be certified.

Deseret News

January 24, 2013

Utah 11th for charter schools

THE STATE IS ONE OF 9 TO GET A 'B' GRADE IN THE NATIONAL EVALUATION

■ BY RACHEL LOWRY
DESERET NEWS

SALT LAKE CITY — Utah charter school policy ranks 11th in the nation, scoring a B grade, according to the Center for Education Reform.

The center, which has been analyzing state charter school laws since 1996, also ranked Utah in the top 10 for online learning, parental choice, teacher quality and transparency in the latest evaluation of charter education

"Utah is a leader when it comes to hitting those hot-button issues that empower parents to be in the driver's seat of their children's education," said Kara Kerwin, director of external affairs at the Center for Education Reform, a nonprofit organization in Washington, D.C.

The state's transparency is exemplary, Kerwin said.

"Utah's website is parent-friendly and accessible, containing easy-to-understand data," she said.

Another critical piece, Kerwin said, is the election of local school boards.

"Held during the general elections in November, parents have the convenience, as well as the power, to make decisions about who runs their schools," she said.

"Utah's charter school law is considered strong because it provides equitable funding to charter schools, facilities funding and a strong authorizing system that includes capable independent bodies such as universities and the semi-independent state charter board," according to the center's website.

CHARTER B3

Utah ranked high in school choice, as well. "Utah has one private school choice program (special-needs vouchers). The state does have a charter school law. Utah allows for limited public virtual schooling. Open enrollment exists, both for intra-district and inter-district public school choice," the website said.

According to the website, Utah has adopted "multiple student-centric policies designed specifically to harness the power of technology." This is due, largely in part, to the passage of SB65 and the Statewide Online Education Program.

Robert Ralphs, executive director of Alianza Academy in Salt Lake City, said state laws and policies allow charter schools to be flexible and encourage the creation of new models. For him, that means online learning.

A hybrid school that combines traditional instruction with nearly three hours of online instruction, Alianza Academy is not the only model for digital learning. Four or five charter schools are modeling such techniques, and nearly every school is moving in that direction, Ralphs said.

"As an outsider who came into the charter school scene only three years ago, I applaud what the people in Utah who've been at it for 14 years have done," he said. "It's really quite remarkable. And it's served kids well."

But there is always room for improvement. Teacher evaluations could use some work, Kerwin said.

"Right now in Utah, eligibility for dismissal is not a consequence of unsatisfactory evaluations," she said. "Ineffective classroom performance is not grounds for dismissal. That's not right for our kids. Utah should be thinking about how to better evaluate schools, teachers and students."

But one consideration must be made, said Sonia Woodbury, director of City Academy, a Salt Lake City charter school.

"The charter school movement started about 20 years ago," Woodbury said. "So while it's good that we have people looking at our schools, we have to remember how relatively new this is, in a sense. There's no clear settling of how things are going to look."

In terms of state policy and law, Woodbury said she's been impressed by the Legislature's willingness to listen.

"Every year, legislators come out of session to speak with us on the hill," she said. "I attend meetings in small and large groups where I have a voice, and people are listening to us. They seem very accessible to me."

Of the 43 U.S. states with charter school laws, four states received an A, nine earned a B, 19 got a C, and 11 ranked in D or F categories.

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The Philadelphia Tribune

January 25, 2013

Pa. gets good grades in education reform ranking

Damon C. Williams
Tribune Staff Writer

The Center for Education Reform, a national non-profit tasked with improving public education, has released an encompassing report that grades parental empowerment, solid educational choices, teacher quality and access to digital learning, among other factors. That Pennsylvania ranks in the top ten of all states can be viewed as proof educational reforms in the commonwealth are beginning to take hold.

According to the annual findings released in the Parent Power Index, Pennsylvania trails Indiana, which ranks first; Florida; Ohio; Arizona; Washington, D.C.; Louisiana and Minnesota. Wisconsin and Utah round out the top ten.

The PPI is an interactive, accessible online tool that collects and itemizes data critical to judging the gains and deficiencies in a parent's control of their child's education. The index is designed to provide in-depth information to not only parents, but to stakeholders, politicians and education policymakers as well.

"All across America, parents are demanding more power over their children's education, but the task of sorting through all the information out there is daunting," said Center for Education Reform President Jeanne Allen. "There are a variety of resources available to evaluate how students are achieving, but there is widespread disagreement about what constitutes sound education reform policy.

As the mother of college students, I liken the PPI to a cumulative GPA, which is a composite of grades from varying professors," Allen continued. "In this case, these professors are among the nation's leading authorities and critical evaluators of education policy."

Each state is graded on five broad categories: school choice, charter schools, online learning, teacher quality and transparency, and the findings related to Pennsylvania are interesting.

For example, the state received points for having a pro-education reform governor in Tom Corbett, but suffered due to limitations in the so-called parent-trigger law, which allows parents to force a change of district leadership if said district doesn't meet the parents' standards. The state also received credit for the number and quality of charter schools, for providing school choice and supporting a performance-based pay structure.

Pennsylvania's overall PPI grade is 74.5 percent.

"A high number of digital learning options prevail alongside charter schools that serve a significant number of students throughout the state. The state affords parents many good information sources and allows them to vote for their elected school boards in traditionally-timed elections," read PPI's Pennsylvania summary. "The state's teacher quality measures are weak, however, and more and better options across all schooling structures are needed and much in demand."

Pennsylvania was shown to be slightly deficient is several areas, however. On the matter of school choice, the index found that Pennsylvania has two private school choice programs, and that the commonwealth does have a charter school law. Pennsylvania enables public virtual schooling, but needs to address its limited open enrollment policies.

In terms of transparency, the index singled out the School District of Philadelphia and the School Reform Commission for their openness; however, improvements must be made in terms of educating parents about other, less traditional modes of education.

"Pennsylvania's department of education website is parent-friendly and school report cards are accessible. It is next to impossible, however, to find information on charter or cyber school options. Generally, elections for the 501 local school boards in Pennsylvania are held in November of odd-numbered years," read the index. "Philadelphia's School Reform Commission is governed by an appointed panel. Harrisburg and Chester Upland are governed by state appointed boards of control, although their local boards still operate with limited authority."

The index also shows that Pennsylvania graduates 80.5 percent of its high school students, while the average SAT score is 1473 and the average ACT score is 22.3; of import, Pennsylvania spends an average of $12,418 on per-pupil funding.

"The index's 'Top Ten' prove that when parents have access to options and good information, all children can succeed," Allen said. "Lawmakers need to look to these exemplars and the policies that have afforded parents greater power elsewhere and act as fast to bring real education reform to their respective states.

"Parents and voters have declared that mediocrity is no longer acceptable," Allen added, "and our elected officials have a mandate to fix out educational and economic problems for good."

Contact staff writer Damon C. Williams at (215) 893-5745 or dwilliams@phillytrib.com.

BOZEMAN DAILY
CHRONICLE
January 30, 2013

Education reform — school choice would benefit all Montanans

"There is no respect in which inhabitants of a low-income neighborhood are so disadvantaged as in the kind of schooling they can get for their children." — economist Milton Friedman

Given the fact that Montana continuously ranks near dead last in the country in average wages and our "low-income neighborhoods" arguably encompass our whole state, it should not go un-noticed that Montana also ranks dead last nationally in educational choice reforms as well. The Center for Education Reform ranks Montana 51st (even behind D.C.) in its Parent Power Index. And Friedman's economic analysis is spot on: There may be a direct connection between Montana's failure to provide educational freedom to our impoverished families and the continued multi-generational stagnation of economic opportunity in Montana.

Of course it is the entrenched special interests such as government union bosses and bureaucrats who block any and all attempts at true reform, insisting that the only answer is to throw more money at a system that already spends $11,530 per student statewide. This means the average Montana worker's entire annual salary is devoured educating just three kids for nine months. This tired "increase spending" non-solution is repeated despite the fact that there are at least 138 studies nationwide which prove that level of funding bears no statistical correlation to quality of education.

JOE BALYEAT
Guest columnist

To the contrary, numerous studies reveal real education reform which does work — and that the key ingredient is true educational choice. Even center-left think tanks like the Brookings Institution concur that both public and private schools do a better job educating kids in "market" environments where there is true competition on a level playing field, as opposed to monopoly areas (such as Montana) where public schools have no real competition. Even Democrat researchers John Chubb and Terry Moe concluded:

"Conventional education reforms have been generally unsuccessful in halting the decline in [school] performance and have little potential for doing so ... The key to better schools is ... greater school autonomy ... competition and parental choice ...

Although the goal of educational choice is to give our children a better education, it would also eliminate stultifying and expensive educational bureaucracies and may yield significant savings."

Montana has the OPI bureaucracy, MSBA bureaucracy, Board of Education bureaucracy, MEA bureaucracy, MHSA bureaucracy, MASA bureaucracy, MQEC bureaucracy, local superintendents bureaucracy, and county superintendents bureaucracy; each with their own fleet of lobbyists to intimidate and indoctrinate your legislators; all paid directly or indirectly at taxpayer expense, all claiming that increased spending is necessary "for the sake of the children," despite scores of studies proving otherwise.

If the last third century of world history taught us anything, it taught that government-run monopolies don't work. Free market competition produces a better product at lower cost. Yet, when it comes to education, strangely Montana remains in the dark ages of government-run monopoly; with no form of publicly funded educational choice whatsoever. Because legislators and governors alike fear the political power of these entrenched educratic special interests, past legislatures refused to give Montana parents the consumer power needed to dent Montana's monolithic, monopolistic, non-responsive, inefficient education bureaucracy. So Montana is left in the dust of educational reform as the only western jurisdiction in the U.S. or Canada with no school choice of any kind (longstanding successful Alberta and British Columbia school choice plans both disprove the old canard that school choice can't work in low-population rural states).

The Detroit News

January 31, 2013

School choice has helped Michigan's children

BY MICHAEL VAN BEEK

A new study by researchers at Stanford University shows superb positive effects for students attending charter schools in Michigan. It is the most rigorous study of charter schools ever done in this state and positions Michigan as one of the nation's leaders in charter school policy and performance.

No other study of Michigan's charter schools comes close to matching the sophistication or comprehensiveness used by Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO). This study compared students in charters to their peers in local public schools who were identical in terms of race, gender, socioeconomic status, prior academic achievement and more.

Researchers measured annual learning gains for about 85,000 charter school students over a five-year period and compared them to their "virtual twins" in conventional schools.

The findings were almost wholly positive for charter school students, and most impressive in Detroit. The typical charter school student made gains worth about two months of learning in reading and math. For a charter school student in Detroit, it was more than three months. Forty-two percent of charters outperformed conventional public schools in math and 35 percent did the same in reading. In Detroit, those numbers are 49 and 47 percent, respectively.

CREDO has evaluated charter school performance in 19 states using this same methodology. Of those, only Louisiana and New Jersey can hold a candle to Michigan. Louisiana charter school students also demonstrated learning gains of about two months when compared to their peers. In New Jersey, the average student in a charter made gains of about two months in reading and about three months in math.

Michigan's results were more consistent, though. Unlike Louisiana, students in Michigan charters demonstrated increased learning gains the longer they were enrolled. And while the New Jersey study found positive results for 44 of 54 of subgroups of student and schools, CREDO found a charter school advantage in 52 of 56 cases studied in Michigan.

What accounts for Michigan's success is hard to pinpoint, but certainly the state's charter school law and policies have a lot to do with it. In fact, a just-released analysis of such policies by the Center for Education Reform gave Michigan's policies one of only four "A's," ranking it fourth overall in the country.

Michigan is unique in the number of charter school authorizers it allows — such as public universities and community colleges — and the amount of autonomy it grants these authorizers.

These authorizers are not concerned with protecting existing K-12 institutions, which comes at the expense of denying quality charter school options for parents.

Michigan has historically allowed more charter schools than other states. The new CREDO study suggests that Michigan has a "highly dynamic market ... creating a new positive stock of charter schools."

In time, the cap on charter schools will sunset. More net-positive competition will occur.

The typical Michigan student is better off for having enrolled in a charter school. Expanding school choice options in this state seems prudent.

Neither this recommendation, nor CREDO's findings, is a condemnation of conventional public schools. They are rather merely an affirmation that Michigan's 20-year-old charter school experiment is working and a compliment to the policymakers responsible for creating charter school laws and to the work of charter school authorizers, boards, principals and teachers.

WyomingTribuneEagle

January 31, 2013

IN OUR OPINION

Real choice entails better charter law

THE ISSUE: National School Choice Week was marked at the Herschler Building in Cheyenne on Tuesday with a rally and governor's proclamation.

WE BELIEVE: We agree that school choice is growing in Wyoming. But it never will fully blossom without a better charter school law.

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK: Contact us via email at opinion@wyomingnews.com.

School choice advocates rallied at the Herschler Building on Tuesday, saying their facilities represent major opportunities for state residents.

We beg to differ. While the WTE is a big supporter of choice – as long as it provides quality results – Wyoming never will have true education options until it improves its charter school law.

The weakness of those state statutes was emphasized again, as it is every year, in a report from the Center for Education Reform last month.

The group gave Wyoming's law a "D" grade, adding that it is the fifth-weakest of the nation's 43 state statutes. It also deducted three points from the Cowboy State's score because "the state has imposed a de facto cap (on the number of charters allowed) by not encouraging or working to improve (the) charter environment."

This lack of effort on charter schools has been somewhat of a mystery to us as we have watched the Legislature tackle school accountability. No doubt, lawmakers should be demanding more from the public schools. Thus, measuring their performance – and requiring that they push for higher levels of success – makes perfect sense.

A joint project of the Casper Star-Tribune and Wyoming Tribune Eagle

But that is only part of the formula. We believe, as do many other experts in the field of education, that competition can reform and lift the system faster than simply tweaking it. And that idea has, for the most part, been left out of the Wyoming discussion.

The fact is, charter schools, done right, can provide true competition. For example, it appears pupils at Cheyenne's new PODER Academy are enjoying big gains in test scores. If that continues, Laramie County School District 1 stakeholders are going to demand similar results across the entire system.

It is true that lawmakers are putting in a lot of work on accountability. But we would like to see them at least begin looking at the state's charter school law. It has at least two major problems:

■ Approval process. Currently the only way a charter school can be sanctioned is through local districts. And they have disincentives for doing so: They fear competition (what if the charter does do better?) and a new charter pulls funds away from the current schools in the system.

Lawmakers should look at either providing for appeals to a neutral body – the State Board of Education is not that – or setting up a separate authorizer. The latter option is better: It would speed things up and provide a cleaner look at applications.

■ Lack of autonomy. Charters are supposed to be about a tradeoff: The schools get the freedom to operate as they see fit, and the district gets results. If the schools falter, they can be forced to close. This autonomy allows for the kind of innovations at the charters that can move the system forward.

Wyoming's law provides only limited autonomy: Charters must follow state and district rules. That cannot drive real change.

It is early in the general session, but education reformers like Rep. Matt Teeters, R-Lingle, and Sen. Hank Coe, R-Cody, should put charter schools on their "to do" lists for interim study. If they truly are interested in lifting Wyoming's schools – and we know they are – they will seek to inject a dose of competition into the system by muscling up the state's charter school statutes.

THE TOLEDO JOURNAL

February 5, 2013

Toledo School for the Arts touts success during open house

By Journal Staff

Toledo School for the Arts, 333 14th, hosted an open house Saturday, Jan. 26.

The purpose of the open house was for students and their families who seek a rigorous academic curriculum without sacrificing the artistic opportunities that ignite creative thinking, said Dave Gierke, School for the Arts development director.

This also was an opportunity for prospective students and their families to meet teachers, student organization fair, performances, gallery exhibitions, application drop-off and time enrollment counselors.

For seven consecutive years, the Ohio Department of Education has rated TSA "Excellent." It also has received national attention as a U.S. Department of Education Blue Ribbon School, a Bronze level recognition by U.S. News and World Report as one of the nation's top high schools and Charter School of the Year by the Center for Education Reform.

In addition, Ohio Superintendent of Education Susan Zelman named TSA a School of Promise.

School administrators expected more than 300 families to attend and anticipated 400 this year, Gierke said.

The school is accepting applications for the next academic year (2013-14) up to Wednesday, Feb. 6.

Because of the number of applications, the school will have a lottery for admissions Friday, March 1. It wants to fill 60 spots in the high school, Gierke said.

Presently, the school has 574 students, he said. The capacity is 650.

About 70 percent of the students come from Toledo. It has students from 23 different school districts.

Toledo School for the Arts, which opened in 1999, is a public "community" or charter school focused on providing a college preparatory academic curriculum and an intense visual and performing arts environment.

Admission is open to creative students in grades 6-12 who seek an educational community of peers who are serious about their artistic endeavors. Bowling Green State University sponsors TSA.

In addition to core academic subjects, classes are offered in music, dance, theatre and visual arts. TSA provides students opportunities to work with professional artists to expand their arts experiences and knowledge base.

"We integrate the arts at every juncture," Gierke said. "We tap into their passion for creativity."

TSA has ARTnerships with our area's community and cultural institutions including the Toledo Museum of Art, the Toledo Symphony, the Toledo Repertoire Theatre, the Arts Commission of Greater Toledo and the Toledo Zoo.

TSA graduates earn admission to the nation's finest institutions of high education and win outstanding academic and arts scholarships.

Creative students find a welcoming artistic environment that challenges and celebrates the arts.

For more information, call 419-246-8732.

Fauquier Times Democrat

February 6, 2013

Education initiatives keep lawmakers busy

By Kenric Ward
Watchdog.org Virginia Bureau

Virginia lawmakers hit the books during national School Choice Week, voting on several education-reform bills, with mixed results.

The House Education Committee moved House Bill 1999, part of Gov. Bob McDonnell's "All-Students" education reform package, to the House floor on a 14-7 vote.

Sponsored by Del. Tag Greason, R-Lansdowne, the bill requires the state Board of Education to develop by Aug. 1 a grading system in addition to the standards of accreditation for individual school performance.

Thirteen Republican supporters were joined by Del. Joe Morrissey, D-Richmond. The other six Democrats on the panel were joined in opposition by Del. Scott Lingamfelter, R-Woodbridge.

Legislation that would authorize more charter schools didn't fare so well.

Snubbing their national party's position, Virginia Democrats killed a charter-school bill in the state Senate and threatened to quash similar reform measures.

The 2012 Democratic platform declared the party would "work to expand public school options for low-income youth, including charter schools."

But Democrats in the General Assembly continue to resist expansion of the publicly-funded, independently operated charter campuses.

With only four charter schools, Virginia has received failing grades from the Center for Education Reform and the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools for its charter-averse policies.

As legislators argued over whether to grade schools, the House of Delegates passed a bill Thursday that blocks public access to performance measures of teachers.

The National Council on Teacher Quality this month gave Virginia a D+ for overall teacher quality standards, and Gov. McDonnell's push to grade schools on an A-F scale continues to gain steam in the General Assembly.

Thomas Calhoun, president of the Norfolk chapter of the American Federation of Teachers, said personnel files should always be off-limits — but maybe teacher performance information should be separated and somehow made available to families.

"Should they have access to the teacher's personnel file? Absolutely not," Calhoun said. "I don't care if you have 10 kids in my class. ...I think the real question here, about the indicators for their performance — I really don't have a problem with that part of it. And I think this whole issue could be solved if performance indicators were not put in the personnel file."

The Richmond Voice

February 12, 2013

Virginia receives failing grade from charter school advocates

By Kathryn Watson

ALEXANDRIA — As the nation celebrated National School Choice Week last week, the Old Dominion received a flunking grade for its charter school environment — again.

The Center for Education Reform, which grades each state on an A-F scale in its annual Charter School Law Report Card, gave Virginia a flat-out F in its 2013 report, placing it second-to-last in the nation behind only Missouri out of the 42 states with charter school laws.

Virginia, with just four charter schools serving fewer than 400 of the commonwealth's 1.3 million K-12 students, finished second-to-last in the 2012 report.

But the Center for Education Reform isn't the only organization to give Virginia low rankings for its charter school environment. The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools ranked the Old Dominion 37 out of the 42 states with charter school laws.

But those poor grades won't change unless the state constitution does, said Chris Braunlich, vice president of the Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy, a Virginia public policy think tank.

"The problem is that the fix to this is not strictly a legislative fix," said Braunlich. "There are provisions in the state constitution that say very specifically that the supervision of public schools is in the hands of the local school board."

Virginia's constitution says the "supervision of schools in each school division shall be vested in a school board," a phrase Virginia courts have time and time again interpreted to mean that only local school divisions can decide the fate of a charter school. Of course, that becomes problematic, Braunlich said, because the whole point of a charter school is to run independently of the typical public school system. And there's only one real way to fix that, said Braunlich, a former board member of Fairfax County Public Schools.

"It often means you can't have an alternate charter authorized, unless you amend the constitution," said Braunlich. "Ultimately, the way to do this is by amending the constitution."

And while his proposal isn't the legislature's first attempt, Del. Greg Habeeb, R-Salem, is trying to do just that with a bill filed last month. HJ 693 would take the first step toward a constitutional amendment establishing a statewide school division to oversee charter schools — but only if they are first turned down by local school divisions. Habeeb did not immediately respond for comment.

"Supervision of the statewide school division is to be vested in a single statewide school board established as may be provided by law," the proposed law reads.

Barbara Coyle, executive director for the Virginia School Boards Association, said the status quo law affords enough opportunities for charter schools to start and flourish, since the localities, rather than the state, decide what is best for local students.

"I think it's a good process," Coyle said. "I think it's a cautious process that offers a procedure that looks out for the best interest of the children."

But it's independence from local school divisions that makes charter schools generally more successful and economical, said Joy Pullmann, a research fellow in education for the free-market-oriented Heartland Institute.

"I think the biggest benefit to them is the flexibility that it gives," Pullmann said. "So, a school can say, we want to be a Montessori school, and it can still be a public school. So, it attracts a group of families who share a common mission rather than trying to accommodate the different, express demands of all these different populations in the same district. And that flexibility also extends to the way that the school does its finances, and especially to its teacher contracts, which is really important."

Essentially, the success or failure of a state's charter schools depends on the authorizing body or bodies, the group of people who volunteer to oversee and administer a charter school, Pullmann said. An "authorizer" is whatever body the state law allows to oversee, but not operate, charter schools.

The more authorizers a state has, the better, said Jim Goenner, president and CEO of the Michigan-based National Charter Schools Institute. States with more authorizers consistently perform better in national rankings, he said.

"It's just like schools," Goenner said. "It's the idea that there's choice in options and that some healthy competition makes everybody better."

In that sense, even Habeeb's proposal to add a new, overarching school division isn't ideal, Goenner said.

"If you're talking (about) Virginia, if your only authorizing bodies are local school districts that are not chartering anything, a state appeals process is a benefit," Goenner said. "But I'm personally not a fan of it — if somebody turns you down as a school and you appeal, then they're forced to work with you. We believe that better authorizing happens by choice."

But even if Virginia passes a constitutional amendment — which requires the House and Senate to approve it over two legislative cycles, plus a favorable vote of the people in a ballot measure

See "Charter school" on pg. 21

— the charter school quandary won't be solved completely, Braunlich said. Direct state funding for education isn't sufficient to fund any school, so localities would probably have to pitch in, too.

"The funds would have to come from locally, but that creates the argument of OK, now you're taking the money from the locality to put money in the charter school that the locality has no control over," Braunlich said. "There's a whole range of issues."

The Charlotte Observer

February 13, 2013

Crowd hears about new charter school

Cabarrus Charter is sister to future Mooresville school

By Lisa Thornton
Correspondent

The parking lots and side streets of Fire Station No. 9 were full Feb. 5 as parents went to learn about a charter school opening in Concord in August.

Attendance at an informational meeting for Cabarrus Charter Academy surpassed the school official's anticipation. The Community Room at the station reached its 100-person occupancy within minutes, causing organizers to offer an impromptu question-and-answer session in the parking lot for at least 50 people who couldn't get in.

Still others got back in their cars, hoping to get a seat at one of the next meetings scheduled in coming weeks.

The turnout showed community interest is high for the new school, even though construction crews have barely broken ground.

Cabarrus Charter Academy will be on the southeast corner of Poplar Tent Road and George Liles Boulevard in Concord. Kindergarten through sixth grade will be offered in the school's first year, with grades 7-12 added in subsequent years.

The school was developed and will be managed by Charter Schools USA, a Florida-based company that operates 48 charter schools in five states.

Another school in the works by the company is just down the road in Mooresville. Langtree Charter Academy will be on a new access road west of Alcove and north of Langtree roads, and is set to open the same month as Cabarrus Charter Academy.

Interest for both schools has been immense.

An information session for Langtree Charter Academy held Monday at the Charles Mack Citizens Center in Mooresville brought 400 parents – a number the facility was prepared to handle.

Sandy Castro, director of business development for Charter Schools USA, said it's a reflection of the times.

"Parents want choices," Castro said. "They're not happy with where they are, and they see this is an opportunity."

Charter schools have been on the rise in recent years. The Center for Education Reform lists 5,714 charter schools in operation during the last school year across the U.S. North Carolina has 105 charter schools.

Shannon Adam's 5-year old daughter will begin school next year. Adam, who lives in Kings Crossing, attended Tuesday's meeting to learn all her options.

"This is brand-new for us," Adam said. "We just want to get all the information we can."

Others who attended asked questions that compared their child's current traditional public school to that of a charter school.

Lisa Perry, of Gable Oaks, liked that her son Dylan, a second-grader, would study a foreign language each week if he switched to Cabarrus Charter Academy, where world languages will be taught at each grade level.

"That's a big appeal to me. I really think that we should have foreign language taught earlier," said Perry. "Right now in his elementary school they have physical education one day. They have music, but Spanish is not one of those specials taught."

Perry left the meeting happy with what she heard, and pleased with the variety of programs available.

"I like that the county offers magnet schools and charter schools," she said. "It's just another option to customize education based on your kid."

THE CINCINNATI ENQUIRER

February 18, 2013

IN OUR SCHOOLS: ON THE JOB

Their schools, their rules

Experts: Archdiocese has right to fire over blogs

By Denise Smith Amos
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and Jessica Brown
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Chase Berger, a 15-year-old sophomore at Purcell Marian High, calls the recent firing of the school's dean of student life overkill.

The archdiocese a week ago fired Mike Moroski, also an assistant principal at the East Walnut Hills school, for writing in his personal blog that he favors same-sex marriage. But that's the problem: The church has taken a worldwide stance against legalizing same-sex marriage.

On Friday, Chase joined a group of Moroski supporters who handed to Cincinnati archdiocese staff a thick binder of papers bearing what they said were nearly 7,500 signatures and hundreds of comments from supporters, asking the archdiocese to reinstate Moroski.

"I think the archdiocese overreacted," Chase said. "You don't fire someone for a simple comment. Couldn't they just have given him a verbal or written warning or put something in his personnel file?"

Not really, say experts on Catholic schools and policies.

What Moroski wrote in his Jan. 27 blog publicly disagreed with a key tenet of the Catholic Church, they said. The archdiocese is within its rights to decide he can't teach or counsel in its schools, they said.

Many people are surprised to learn that staff in Catholic schools don't have the same rights as those at public schools, said Sister Angie Shaughnessy, dean of graduate studies and legal counsel at St. Catharine College in St. Catharine, Ky.

"The Constitution and Bill of Rights talk about what the government can and can't do, so you have to be in a government school to have those rights," she said.

"If you work at Ford, you can't tell people to buy Chevrolets. And if you work at McDonald's you can't wear a button saying 'Eat at Burger King.' "

The Cincinnati Archdiocese first urged Moroski to recant his blog post. Moroski, who says he's a devout Catholic, said he couldn't in good conscience fail to stand up for his beliefs, as he has told his students to do.

And this isn't the only time Cincinnati's archdiocese has fired its educators for failing to live up to the church's standards.

In 2009, the archdiocese suspended a Catholic nun and a parish ousted a volunteer religion teacher because they both openly supported ordaining women as priests.

In 2010, the archdiocese fired a Catholic elementary teacher, initially for getting pregnant while single, but later the reason changed to her method for getting pregnant. She had in vitro fertilization, which is against Catholic teachings. A similar case is pending in Indiana.

"All employees of Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati are asked to reflect, uphold and live out the teachings of the Catholic church," said Jim Rigg, superintendent of schools in the Cincinnati archdiocese, the nation's eighth-largest network of Catholic schools.

"Parents enroll their children in Catholic schools because they wish them to be taught Catholic values. It is therefore critical that our employees be able to authentically convey and model Catholic teachings."

Besides, he said, archdiocesan employees sign employment paperwork (including their contracts) agreeing to such policies, and courts have repeatedly upheld those contracts and policies.

Shaughnessy estimated that 60 to 80 percent of Catholic schools have morality clauses, which appear more often at grade schools than high schools, she said.

Still, it's rare to hear about people being fired or not hired because of the clauses, said Leo Bradley, chair of Xavier University's department of educational leadership. Often, it's up to the local bishop or archbishop to decide the extent to which educators are required to live up to Roman Catholic precepts.

"It's perfectly legal for Catholic schools to have criteria for employment, which includes morals clauses, because part of their mission is faith-based," Bradley said.

"The bigger question – perhaps bigger than the legal questions – is does that really reflect what modern society really wants? Because a school is a marketplace of ideas. It's always been that way. This is a place where you have a robust exchange of ideas."

Morality clauses are likely as old at the Roman Catholic Church, but they've become more common in other kinds of religious schools in recent years, Bradley said, recalling the case last June of a music teacher who said Cincinnati Hills Christian Academy in Sycamore Township rescinded a job offer because he is gay.

"If a teacher or an employee ... is perceived to be violating the very basis for a school's existence, that shouldn't come as a surprise or be viewed as a negative if ... that teacher has been dismissed," said Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform, a school choice think tank in Washington, D.C.

Nor is it just teachers; in the late 1980s, Catholic theologians were on the hot seat or facing excommunication for teachings that strayed from traditional Catholic beliefs, said Joe Zalot, associate professor of religious studies at the College of Mount St. Joseph in Delhi Township.

Flashpoints back then included whether priests could marry and whether women could be ordained priests. The answer to both is still no.

A major difference now is the speed and pervasiveness of social media, the experts say. The public is much more likely to find out about a dismissed teacher or principal and to rally opposition. Educators are more likely to stumble when expressing their views on their Facebook or web pages, assuming incorrectly that they'll stay private.

Not all sins are fireable sins, Zalot said; public statements up the ante.

"Certainly nobody's perfect," he said. "What it comes down to is here's a person making public statements about something that is contrary to church teaching."

Bangor Daily News

March 8, 2013

LePage bringing teaching experts to Maine for summit

BY CHRISTOPHER COUSINS
BDN STAFF

AUGUSTA — School choice and education reforms championed by former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush will get top billing later this month at an education summit set up by Gov. Paul LePage.

The summit, promised by LePage during his State of the State Address, will feature speakers from all over the country, according to new details about the summit released Thursday.

"We are bringing national experts to Maine to demonstrate what other states are doing and why we are being left behind," said LePage. "We can no longer stand still, we cannot wallow in the status quo. The rest of the country and the world is passing us by."

During his State of the State speech, the governor said he favors school choice and charter schools because they provide more choices for students, though opponents of those ideas say they funnel too much taxpayer money away from public schools. A LePage proposal to open up school choice in Maine failed to gain legislative approval, though his initiative to create charter schools in Maine passed. The state's first two charter schools opened last year.

"School choice benefits all kids who deserve the best education that we can provide," said LePage during the speech. "Giving students options such as charter schools is more than just a political position."

LePage said he spends a lot of his free time studying education reform, which has been at the core of his priorities as governor. The education summit is billed as a venue to breed new ideas.

The March 22 summit at Cony High School in Augusta will feature keynote speaker Dr. Tony Bennett, the commissioner of education in Florida, and the first session is titled "The Florida Story." Three employees of the Foundation for Excellence in Education, which was founded by Bush in 2008 as an education reform think tank, will speak during the morning session: Patricia Levesque, the foundation's CEO, Matthew Ladner, its senior policy advisor, and Mike Thomas, who runs the foundation's communications department.

The second session, titled "Stretching the School Dollar," will feature Eric Lerum, vice president of national policy for StudentsFirst, another national think tank pursuing education reform. StudentsFirst was founded by education policy guru Michelle Rhee, author of "Radical: Fighting to Put Students First." Also speaking will be Dr. Alden Monberg, a retired Maine Maritime Academy professor. In addition to her experience with the academy, Monberg is a former member of the Orono School Committee, served on the board of directors for the Region 4 United Technologies Center and was a director for the Maine School Board Association.

The third session is titled School Choice. LePage's administration has been a vocal supporter of school choice, which allows students to pick the school they wish to attend and have public education dollars fund their tuition. The speakers in this session will include Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform; Rep. Alisha Morgan, a Democrat in the Georgia House of Representatives, recipient of the "Champion for Choice" award from the American Federation for Children; and Rene Menard, head of school for Thornton Academy in Saco.

LoudounTimes

March 6, 2013

School Board rejects charter application

By Alanna Dvorak
Times-Mirror Staff Writer

After nearly four months of deliberation and debate the Loudoun County School Board officially voted to deny the charter school application for the Loudoun County Math and IT Academy.

In an 8-1 vote, the board emphatically opposed the application at the Feb. 25 School Board meeting.

Members largely cited an incomplete curriculum, deficiencies in management, budgetary issues and lack of community support as the source of their votes.

"We had a trickling of support at the end, but this has been a process," School Board Vice Chairman Jill Turgeon (Blue Ridge) said. "It troubles me that there's a lack of community support."

Jennifer Bergel (Catoctin) added, "There is interest in charter schools. There is not interest in this charter school."

School Board members also noted that the founding board for the LMITA was composed primarily of engineers with little education background; Kevin Kuesters (Broad Run), who moved to deny the application, noted that the financial officer has no accounting experience.

Bill Fox (Leesburg) was the lone dissident in the vote.

"I don't see anything gained by making the applicant start from scratch," Fox said. "I'd like to see them get to work, come back and then have us vote on it."

Twenty-seven people attended the meeting to speak about the charter school, with 15 opposing the academy.

"My opposition is based on the application. They can't show or demonstrate support for this school," Gil St. John said to the board. "They have an inability to answer basic questions ..Are you convinced that the curriculum in areas other than IT is the best?"

Proponents of the application mainly cited a desperate need for STEM education, as the job market struggles to fill positions that require computer specialization.

The application process has been a turbulent one for the LMITA, which passed the Virginia Board of Education in July. LMITA's troubles began at the local level, where the county questioned the completeness of the application and the feasibility of opening the school in the fall of 2013.

In December, a select committee refused to recommend the charter school application for full approval.

The founders of the LMITA have 60 days to appeal the decision and are allowed to submit an amended application based on the reasons for denial submitted by the School Board.

What would work?

During the Feb. 25 meeting, Kuesters iterated what he feels a charter school must possess in order to be successful.

"My view of charter schools is that

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they serve two needs. The first is to fix failing schools, which doesn't apply in this case with Loudoun County," Kuesters said. "The second is to develop new ways of teaching kids."

"You need to impress us with what you have," Kuesters said. "It has to be a better way of doing things."

With Loudoun County schools well over the state average in both reading and mathematics and graduation rates at 94 percent, is there a place for a charter school in Loudoun?

Despite the failure of the LMITA, School Board Chairman Eric Hornberger still feels charter schools could find their place in Loudoun, especially as interest in the school choice and the charter school model grows.

Hornberger doesn't think the role of charter schools is to compete with area schools; rather, to offer a specialization or an alternative.

"I think they can be more successful in certain areas, whereas we as a school system have to try to cater to everyone," Hornberger said.

Virginia has just four charter schools, compared to neighbors Maryland, which has 52, and North Carolina, which boasts 107. According to the Center for Education Reform, Virginia is second-to-last in a list ranking states' charter school environments.

The School Board hopes LMITA's denial doesn't discourage other applicants from trying to establish schools.

South Bend Tribune

March 9, 2013

Study: Charter school students learning more

■ But not all of the findings are favorable.

By CELESTE BOTT
Capital News Service

LANSING — An average Michigan charter school student will learn more in a year than his or her public school peer, according to a new report by Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes.

The study found that students from Michigan charter schools learn an average of two month's more of math and reading per academic year.

Twenty-seven percent of the state's charter school students are from Detroit, and Detroit charter school students gained up to three months' worth of additional education, it said.

Charter schools are publicly funded but can be privately run. They were established in part so that individual schools could have more independence over curriculum and teaching staff.

Margaret Raymond, director of the center, praised Michigan's charter school practices, especially given problems that districts like Detroit face.

"These findings show that Michigan has set policies for charter schools to produce consistent high quality across the state," Raymond said. "The results are especially welcome for students in communities that face significant education challenges."

It is the center's first in-depth study of charter schools in the state. A total of 85,650 students attend 276 charters in the state. For the study, 61 schools were too small to be analyzed, resulting in a total study sample of 212 charters.

Not all of the findings were favorable to the alternative public schools, however.

For example, 14 percent of Michigan charter schools showed below average growth and achievement, and 25 percent of students perform below average in math.

Devora Davis, a co-author of the report, attributed those conflicting numbers to the use of averages — there are both struggling charters and high-performing charters that distort the data.

The poor performances are offset by the growing proportion of charters with high-level achievement, Davis said.

"Should these trends continue, the share of schools which currently lag the state averages would be expected to decline," Davis said. "These absolute improvements are within sight in Michigan."

Stanford's earlier national study in 2009 was heavily criticized by the Center for Education Reform — based in Washington, D.C. — for its use of inaccurate state data.

According its president, Jeanne Allen, the new study done in Michigan and a similar one done in New Jersey use an improved methodology.

"In these state-level studies, it appears that the inclusion of a wider range of students and more school-level data were used to identify and compare individuals to their 'traditional public school' counterparts," Allen said.

Doing so provided a more realistic view of students, and therefore, more credible results, she said.

Other experts are still critical of the study.

For instance, Amber Arellano, executive director of the Royal Oak-based Education Trust-Midwest, said that the use of averages in the study actually hides more accurate results, and she called for more government accountability for charter quality.

"The study's focus on average charter student learning gains masks some great disparities in Michigan charter performance," Arellano said. "Some charter schools are doing well and should be recognized for that.

Other criticisms included the study's failure to account for the more than 30 new charter schools that opened this fall, or the more than 20 percent of previously established charters whose schools were too small for CREDO's study standards, as well as the fact that most charter high schools weren't studied at all.

Michael Van Beek, director of education policy for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in Midland, said that it was important to remember that many students attending charter schools are among the poorest in the nation.

"Based on the well-established relationship between test scores and student poverty, one should expect most Michigan's charter public schools to score below the state average since they serve a higher portion of poor students," Van Beek said.

"The Stanford study says 70 percent of charter public school students qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch compared to 43 percent in conventional public schools," he said.

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