From: Clare Crowson (Clare@afloridapromise.org) <ClareAF@meridianstrategiesllc.com>
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NATIONAL NEWS

House ESEA Draft Would Rein in Federal Accountability Rules

Education Week

By: Alyson Klein

Januayr 6, 2012

http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/01/06/15esea.h31.html?tkn=PUZFzDpkjsL8RakSAiXt4zuw5acilejiOcxY&cmp=clp-edweek

House Republicans released two draft bills that would significantly scale back the federal role in K-12 schools and go further than any other proposal yet to dismantle the accountability tenets at the heart of the decade-old No Child Left Behind Act.

The measures, put forth by U.S. Rep. John Kline, R-Minn., chairman of the House Education and the Workforce Committee today, take some of the same steps as a bipartisan Senate rewrite of NCLB—and the Obama administration's own vision for rewriting the law. Like those proposals, the Republican bills would entirely scrap the law's signature yardstick, adequate yearly progress, or AYP, while largely keeping NCLB'S current testing schedule in place. ("Obama Outlines NCLB Flexibility," September 28, 2011.)

However, the proposals take sharply different turns in other areas. They would, for example, significantly water down the federal role in intervening in schools, including the lowest performers, and would grant broad funding flexibility to districts.

In renewing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, of which NCLB is the latest version, the drafts would:

• Require districts to craft teacher evaluations based in part on student outcomes, and use them in personnel decisions;

• Eliminate tutoring and school choice requirements under NCLB;

• Retain the law's testing regime in math and reading in grades 3-8 and once in high school, but eliminate science as a required subject;

• Get rid of the law's requirement that teachers be "highly qualified," or required to demonstrate they are competent in the subject they are teaching and be state-certified;

• Limit how much money could be spent on class-size reduction.

And unlike on the Senate side, where U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, the chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, was able to get support from three Republicans for his NCLB rewrite, the House vision is a Republican-only affair. Rep. Kline had been negotiating with Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., the top Democrat on the panel, but the two were unable to reach agreement.

The scope of the federal role in education was the source of the conflict, Rep. Kline said Jan. 5 on former Education Secretary Bill Bennett's radio program "Morning in America."

"Democrats are reluctant to let go of the power of the secretary of education," the committee chairman said. "We do agree that the law needs to be changed."

But, if Rep. Kline is unable to attract Democratic support for the measure, it may not get very far. Sen. Harkin said last year that he does not want to move his committee's ESEA reauthorization proposal to the floor unless he sees a bipartisan product out of the House.

Already Rep. Miller has made it known he isn't happy about the partisan path.

"While parties in both houses working together is the tried and true way to accomplish education reform, House Republicans have now opted to walk away from bipartisanship and craft partisan legislation," he said in a statement. "By abandoning efforts to reach a consensus, this partisanship shuts the door on NCLB reform in this Congress."

The House proposal, which is considered a discussion draft subject to change, would retain the law's requirement to test students in reading and mathematics in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school. And it would require schools to continue to break out data to show how special populations of students—such as English-language learners, children in poverty, and racial minorities— are doing relative to their peers.

The House proposal, which is considered a discussion draft subject to change, would retain the law's requirement to test students in reading and mathematics in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school. And it would require schools to continue to break out data to show how special populations of students—such as English-language learners, children in poverty, and racial minorities— are doing relative to their peers.

But states would no longer have to test students in science—a subject that is required under the NCLB law but does not have to be used to measure AYP.

And under the measure, states would get to craft their own accountability systems. That general principle largely jibes with a bill that passed the Senate education committee with bipartisan support, and with the administration's plan to offer states waivers from pieces of the NCLB law in exchange for embracing certain reform priorities. But the waiver package required states to continue to set annual goals for student achievement, which is not called for under the House or Senate proposals.

The House proposal also would go much further than the Senate and the administration's waiver package in dismantling the federal role in intervening in struggling schools—essentially gutting it.

Under both the House and Senate proposals, states would get to cook up their own remedies for many schools that aren't making progress. And both proposals would get rid of the requirement that states allow students in underperforming schools to transfer to better schools or get free tutoring.

But the House would scrap the School Improvement Grant program, which calls on states to use a very specific set of interventions—including removing the principal and getting rid of some teachers—in schools that are in the bottom 5 percent for student achievement. The state wouldn't have to focus on fixing a certain percentage of schools under the House bill.

And, unlike the Senate bill, the House wouldn't require states to figure out a plan for the 5 percent of schools with persistent achievement gaps. That's also a difference from the administration's waiver package, which calls for states to figure out a plan for their bottom 5 percent of schools, and for another 10 percent of schools that are struggling.

Standards Debate

The House measure also takes a different tack than the Senate when it comes to academic standards. The House bill would not require states to set "college-and-career standards"—a major aim of both the Senate bill and a marquee goal of the Obama administration.

Under both the Senate bill and the administration's waiver package, states would have to develop standards that would prepare students to take credit-bearing courses at post-secondary institutions, or for a career. The House proposal supports those aims.

But under the House proposal, the secretary of education would be barred from doing anything to encourage states to craft more uniform, rigorous standards. That would seem to take aim at U.S. Secretary Arne Duncan's decision to give a leg up in the Race to the Top competition to states that worked together to set standards. It also would seem to rebuff the department's move to make adoption of college- and career-ready standards a key feature of its waiver package.

The House proposal also would make big changes when it comes to funding flexibility for schools. It would eliminate the requirement known as maintenance of effort, which calls for states and school districts to keep up their own financing for education at a certain level in order to tap federal funds.

And the legislation would provide significant new funding flexibility for districts that want to transfer money aimed at one special population—such as English-language learners—to another.

The measure would merge programs aimed at migrant students, neglected and delinquent children, English-language learners, rural students, and Indian children, into the biggest K-12 program, the Title I program for disadvantaged children. Districts could use the funds for any activity authorized under those programs. No money could be transferred out of Title I schools, but extra funds could go to other low-income schools.

And, under a second proposal, states would be required to reserve a certain portion of funding to support state and local programs outside of the traditional public school system, such as tutoring and after-school programs.

Teacher Issues

But in at least one area—teacher evaluations—the second House draft appears to carve out a broader role for the federal government than the Senate bill does.

The House proposal would scrap the law's highly qualified teacher requirement, which requires teachers to have content expertise in their subjects, and call for districts to craft teacher-evaluation systems that would rely in significant part on student achievement, although other measures could also be included. Districts would have to use the evaluations to inform personnel decisions. And districts would have to come up with more than two categories for rating teachers.

The Senate bill, on the other hand, doesn't make teacher evaluations a requirement for every district, just for those that want to get competitive grants from the Race to the Top or the Teacher Incentive Fund, which provides money for performance pay.

And the House measure would make a major change to how states spend roughly $2.5 billion a year in federal funding for teacher quality. Right now, states have broad flexibility to spend that money on professional development, reducing class size, and other activities. But, under the proposal, just 10 percent of funds could go to class-size reduction.

This isn't the first reauthorization measure that the House education committee has put forward. The panel has taken somewhat of a piecemeal approach to reauthorizing the law. Last year, the committee approved a partisan bill that would have scrapped more than 40 K-12 programs. And it approved another funding flexibility measure, which got support only from Republicans.

So far, there's been just one bipartisan piece of legislation. The full House approved a bill that would allow states to tap federal funds to replicate charter school models that have a track record of success.

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GOP Hopefuls Favor Scaled-Back K-12 Federal Role

Education Week

By: Alyson Klein

January 6, 2012

http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/01/06/15elections_ep.h31.html?tkn=RXXFNxEFb2bsiEdzZ%2BJxjqHpOXvPKhPWf0V6&cmp=clp-edweek

Though education has played second fiddle so far to other domestic issues in the race for the Republican presidential nomination, the narrowing field includes GOP candidates with compatible views on scaling back the federal role in K-12, but big contrasts in policy specifics and experience.

President Barack Obama, meanwhile, is expected to put a strong emphasis on his own K-12 agenda and achievements—including such signature programs as the Race to the Top and a waiver plan for unpopular provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act—as his re-election effort gains steam.

A look at the education records of the GOP candidates illustrates some common themes, along with differences in style and policy nuance:

• Former Gov. Mitt Romney of Massachusetts, who won the Jan. 3 Iowa caucuses by just eight votes, has an extensive record on education from his time as a state chief executive, and has offered specifics on a number of topics. He's championed standardized testing and supported the NCLB law's emphasis on accountability. But he's also favored a more robust role for the states in K-12 policy.

• Former U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, the close runner-up to Mr. Romney in Iowa, voted for the NCLB law while in the Senate. He has championed special education issues and autism research. He's also said a top-down education system doesn't serve parents well, and is known as staunch conservative on social issues, some of which—such as the teaching of evolution—have classroom implications.

• U.S. Rep. Ron Paul of Texas, who placed third in Iowa, has long said the federal government has no place in schools, and favors abolishing the U.S. Department of Education, and phasing out federal student loans.

• Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, who has teamed up with U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and the Rev. Al Sharpton to call for rigorous school accountability, has said he'd like to shrink the U.S. Department of Education and expand school choice options.

• Texas Gov. Rick Perry, who once led the candidate pack, has clashed with President Obama in a far-from-theoretical way on K-12 policy: His state was one of a handful to opt out of the Race to the Top competition.

• Former Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman, who signed a bill requiring his state's accountability system to trump the NCLB law. With millions in Title I money at stake, the state backed down.

The common emphasis on a diminished federal role in K-12 poses a challenge for the GOP presidential contenders hoping to push their own sweeping education proposals and stand out on the issue, said Patrick McGuinn, an associate professor of political science and education at Drew University, in Madison, N.J. "It's a bit of pickle for Republicans," he said.

Mr. Romney, who went into this week's New Hampshire primary with strong prospects, has an extensive record on education from his time as Massachusetts governor. He also offers specifics on a number of K-12 issues in his 2010 book *No Apology: The Case for American Greatness*.

Generally, Mr. Romney portrays himself as supporting the public schools' role in preparing students for a changing workforce, and names education as a civil right. He expresses his strong preference for using standardized tests to measure student achievement, and credits the NCLB law for helping to advance accountability.

And he uses the book to tout his own record on education in Massachusetts. As governor, for instance, Mr. Romney threatened in 2006 to withhold state funding from schools in New Bedford, Mass., after the mayor there said he would let students earn a high school diploma without passing the state exit exam. The mayor changed his tune.

Mr. Romney created a merit scholarship for students who scored in the top quartile of their high schools on the state graduation test. The scholarship could be used at any state institution and was worth about $2,000 a year. He fought off a moratorium on the creation of charter schools, and pushed to include science as part of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System.

He also discusses in the book a number of teacher initiatives, including his proposal—rejected by the state legislature—for districts to provide an alternative pay structure for teachers. He suggests setting a high bar for education schools and opening up alternative pathways into the profession.

Mr. Romney favors increased salaries for beginning teachers to entice more high-achieving college students into education careers. And he wants to see a movement away from a "lockstep seniority-based" pay grid.

Anne Wass, who served as vice president and then president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association, an affiliate of the National Education Association, said the relationship between the union and Mr. Romney "was not good" when he was governor.

"He really had a closed-door policy," she said. "He didn't want to meet with us."

Robert Costrell, who served as a top adviser to Mr. Romney in Massachusetts, disputed that characterization.

"His door was not closed," Mr. Costrell, now a professor at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, said. While Mr. Romney's relationship with the union was "not always productive," the governor looked for common ground on teacher issues with when he could, including helping one district craft a differential-pay plan for mathematics and science teachers, Mr. Costrell said.

Mr. Romney has a long roster of education advisers. His education co-chairs are: Nina Rees, who served as the Education Department's assistant deputy secretary for innovation and improvement under President George W. Bush; Marty West, a Harvard University education professor; and F. Philip Handy, who chaired the Florida state school board under former Gov. Jeb Bush. Mr. Handy worked as an education adviser on Sen. John McCain of Arizona's presidential campaign in 2008.

Santorum and NCLB

Mr. Santorum was a proponent of the NCLB law when it passed Congress in 2001. But before voting for it, he sought to insert language that would have encouraged biology teachers to discuss controversies behind the theory of evolution with their students. The provision ultimately wasn't included in the law.

In the Senate, Mr. Santorum was also active on special education issues. He was co-author of a bill with then-Sen. Christopher J. Dodd, D-Conn., that would have boosted funding for research on autism, and he fought to reduce paperwork for special education teachers.

The education of Mr. Santorum's own children was the subject of controversy at one point. In 2004, he withdrew his children from a Pennsylvania cyber charter school after questions were raised about whether he could educate them at state taxpayers' expense when his family lived most of the year in a Washington suburb.

On the presidential campaign trail, Mr. Santorum has made limited comments about education. In one exchange, during a Sept. 22 debate, he said schools in general don't serve "the customer," meaning parents. That has to change, he said, but he didn't say elaborate on how he would make that happen.

Paul as Skeptic

Rep. Paul arguably has the field's most consistent record on education, and one that dovetails with his overall philosophy of a tightly circumscribed role for the federal government. He was one of just 41 members of Congress, including 33 Republicans, to vote against the NCLB legislation in 2001.

The Texas congressman has introduced a bill to scrap the federal Education Department. And he has called for phasing out the federal student-loan program. During a debate Nov. 9, he called the program "a total failure. ... I mean a trillion dollars of debt? To be dumped on the taxpayer. ... There's nothing more dramatically failing than that program."

Gingrich's Ideas

Mr. Gingrich has campaigned hard on his record as an activist speaker of the House, though education made up a relatively limited part of that portfolio.

In 1995, Mr. Gingrich backed an effort by his fellow Republicans to eliminate the Education Department, or to combine it with the U.S. Department of Labor. And domestic discretionary spending—including for the Education Department—was a major sticking point between Gingrich-era Republicans in Congress and President Bill Clinton.

But as speaker, Mr. Gingrich largely let the House education committee chairman, Rep. William F. Goodling, R-Pa., spearhead K-12 policy, Mr. Goodling said in an interview. "He left it entirely up to me," said Mr. Goodling, who retired from Congress in 2001. "He knew I was an educator and got the issues."

Since leaving Congress in 1999, Mr. Gingrich has been more active on the K-12 scene.

In 2009, he visited at least three cities with Secretary Duncan and Mr. Sharpton, the civil rights activist and former Democratic presidential contender, to call for raising academic standards, lifting state caps on high-quality charter schools, and greater accountability. The visits were part of Mr. Gingrich's work with the Education Equality Project, a nonprofit organization started by Mr. Sharpton and Joel I. Klein, the former New York City schools chancellor.

On the campaign trail, Mr. Gingrich has again called for "shrinking" the federal Department of Education. Lisa Graham Keegan, a former Arizona state schools chief, whom Mr. Gingrich has enlisted as an education adviser, said that position "absolutely squares" with the former speaker's work with Mr. Duncan and Mr. Sharpton.

"He was simply advocating for the view that all children must have access to schools that work," she said.

Ms. Keegan, who also served as an adviser to the 2008 McCain campaign, is now the president of the Breakthrough Network, an organization that connects school choice advocates. Also joining the former speaker as an education adviser is Michael Moe, the chief executive officer of GSV Asset Management Center, an investment company.

Obama on Horizon

The eventual Republican nominee can expect to face off against an incumbent president who has made education a high-profile part of his agenda.

For instance, education aid was a big component of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the economic-stimulus program enacted in 2009, and President Obama championed $10 billion in emergency money to prevent teacher layoffs in 2010. He has made competitive-grant programs, such as the stimulus-funded Race to the Top and Investing in Education initiatives, top priorities.

And the administration has heeded criticism of the NCLB law, most recently with last year's move to offer states waivers of some of the law's provisions, albeit with strings attached. The White House over the summer even hosted a splashy unveiling of that plan.

Voters can expect to see similar events in the future, Mr. McGuinn of Drew University said.

"There's some concern about Obama's leadership" nationally, said Mr. McGuinn. But education, and the waivers in particular, he said, are one of the areas where the president can point to action.

"NCLB waivers say, 'Look, I'm a leader. This is a law that everyone recognizes is problematic ... I've come up with this plan [to fix it] using my regulatory authority," Mr. McGuinn said.

He added: "It's a smart one-two punch for the Obama campaign."

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Governors Association Examines Teacher Merit Pay

US News and World Report

By: Jason Koebler

January 9, 2012

http://www.usnews.com/education/blogs/high-school-notes/2012/01/09/governors-association-examines-teacher-merit-pay

Many pro-reform education experts, including U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, will tell you that one of the most important factors in a child's education is the quality of the teacher—and the way to retain the best teachers is to pay them more. But states and teachers unions nationwide are having trouble agreeing on how their salaries should be determined.

[Read about a recent study that says teachers aren't underpaid.]

Teachers unions are opposed to many reformers' wishes to abolish tenure and to award bonuses based on students' achievement. A 2008 survey of members of the American Federation of Teachers found that awarding bonuses to teachers whose students perform well on standardized tests was the least-supported reason for awarding additional compensation, with just 21 percent of teachers showing support. More than 80 percent of poll respondents agreed that teachers who attained an advanced degree or who took on additional responsibilities should be paid more.

But despite teachers' wishes and a Harvard University study that found a 2007 merit pay program in New York City didn't improve student achievement, states are pushing forward with plans that would award bonuses to the highest performing teachers. Last week, New York suspended funding to 10 districts which couldn't agree with local teachers unions on educator evaluation system guidelines. Meanwhile, in New Jersey, Gov. Chris Christie hopes to abolish teacher tenure in the state.

State governors will have plenty of precedents. In late December, the National Governors Association (NGA), a group that advises America's governors on policy decisions, released its recommendations for states that want to pay teachers for their performance. The recommendations are based on the experiences of six states—Florida, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Rhode Island, and Tennessee—that tried to change teacher pay structures.

[Learn more about an upcoming *U.S. News* rating of teacher preparation programs.]

Some states in the study were more successful in implementing reform than others. Florida ended teacher tenure in 2011 and began to roll out a plan to pay teacher bonuses based on their students' performance, while Tennessee and Rhode Island are still working on legislation. Based on the NGA brief, these are recommendations for reform-minded states to keep in mind during 2012:

• Create teacher evaluation systems: According to the NGA, the first step toward merit pay is creating a fair teacher evaluation system, with input from the educators themselves. "States must have student assessments for measuring growth in learning and data systems capable of linking student outcomes to individual teachers," Bridget Curran, the brief's author, writes. "Most of the six states concluded that they needed stronger, more constructive teacher evaluation systems."

[Learn about an Ohio law that forces merit pay for teachers.]

• Don't rely solely on tests: Strong assessments aren't enough, according to the NGA. Classroom observations should play a part because just 30 percent of teachers work in grades and subjects with yearly standardized assessments. "Making determinations about pay based on only one measure … would not be considered fair to teachers," Curran writes.

• Form strong leadership: Teacher pushback can make these reforms hard to pass. That's why the NGA says "teachers need to be included in every step" of the process. The NGA advocates for strong leadership from governors on the issue. In New York, Gov. Andrew Cuomo and Education Commissioner John King Jr. stood by threats to cut funding to districts that didn't reach agreements with local teachers unions. "In states where the governor and the chief education officer worked together closely to support a common agenda, the results were significant," Curran writes.

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Gates study: Once-a-year teacher evaluations not enough

Associated Press
By: Donna Gordon Blankship
January 6, 2011
http://o.seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/education/2017175868_evaluations07.html

Annual evaluations aren't enough to help teachers improve, and school districts using infrequent classroom observations to determine their best and worst teachers could be making some big mistakes, according to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Once-a-year evaluations aren't enough to help teachers improve, says a report by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

And school districts using infrequent classroom observations to decide who are their best — and worst — teachers could be making some big mistakes, according to the second part of a multiyear study from the foundation.

Preliminary results were posted online Friday.

Good teacher evaluations require multiple nuanced observations by trained evaluators. Those results should be combined with other measures, such as student test scores and classroom surveys, to gather enough information to both evaluate teachers and help them improve, the researchers found after nationwide experiments involving thousands of teachers.

The most common teacher-evaluation method used by school districts today — a single classroom observation once every few years — has only a 33 percent chance of resulting in an accurate assessment of a teacher, the researchers found.

"This confirms what many teachers have been saying for years: That when high-stakes decisions are being made, school districts should allow for more than one observation," said Tom Kane, deputy director of the Seattle-based foundation's education program and leader of the research project.

Teachers across the nation are getting too little feedback and are being left alone to figure out what they need to do to improve, says Vicki Phillips, director of the foundation's education program.

For the past two years, the foundation has been working to build a system of teacher evaluation and feedback to help teachers improve their craft and assist school administrators in their personnel decisions.

This report comes amid efforts across the country to change the way teachers are evaluated. Most of the new systems are a direct result of a call by the federal government for an education overhaul, and many are finding implementation of the evaluation systems difficult.

The core of the Gates Foundation study has been a collection of digital videos of more than 13,000 lessons in classrooms of teachers who volunteered to be studied.

The classrooms are being studied in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools; the Dallas Independent School District; Denver Public Schools; Hillsborough County Public Schools in Tampa and St. Petersburg, Fla.; Memphis City Schools; The New York City Department of Education; and Pittsburgh Public Schools.

The report's main conclusions:

• High-quality classroom observations require clear, specific standards, well-trained and certified evaluators and multiple observations per teacher.

• Classroom evaluations should be combined with student feedback and data on improvement in student test scores. Combining the three kinds of evaluations offsets the weaknesses of each approach.

• The different evaluation methods still need to be refined, but they're better than what most districts are using now.

Memphis Public Schools used to evaluate its teachers once every five years. With financial help from the Gates Foundation, the district has switched to a system of four to six classroom visits by both principal and peer evaluators, followed by feedback meetings focused on improvement.

The new system was implemented after teachers and administrators worked together to set new districtwide standards, and teachers and principals were trained in the new system.

"This process is neither quick nor easy. And we're still working out the kinks," said Tequilla Banks, coordinator of research, evaluation and assessment for the Memphis district. She said, however, that teachers and administrators feel the effort is worth it.

The president of the teachers union in Hillsborough County Schools, which is using both teacher and principal evaluators, said teachers have embraced the new system.

"We're new in this process, but already many teachers tell us they value the conversations they're having with their peers," said Jean Clements.

Hillsborough and Memphis are also experimenting with student surveys.

Those surveys, also being piloted by the foundation in school districts around the nation, are not popularity contests, Kane said. They focus on class experiences and ask students to talk about things like whether they are being challenged and engaged.

College professors have been evaluated by their students for years. Kane, who is also a Harvard professor, said he thinks schoolteachers could learn to appreciate that feedback as well.

"One thing I've learned is once you show people the questions, much of the hesitance fades away," he said.

Districts that can't afford to overhaul their evaluation systems can take some first steps that the foundation and the school districts say would make a difference. Those ideas include:

• Better training and certification for observers, including videotaping lessons and having more than one person evaluate a teacher. • Student surveys to supplement other methods of evaluation or as a way to help teachers and their mentors work together.

• Meetings between teachers and administrators to start a collaboration on improving the evaluations.

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, expressed concern that too much emphasis is being placed on evaluating teachers and not enough on improving their performance.

"Until we make a commitment to develop evaluation systems that are first and foremost about continuous improvement and professional growth, we will continue to struggle in our efforts to provide every child with a high-quality education," she said in a written statement.

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STATE NEWS

Florida Opinion: Miracle of Spending Cuts and Rising Grades

Florida Voice

By: Lloyd Brown

January 9, 2012

http://www.floridavoices.com/columns/lloyd-brown/miracle-spending-cuts-and-rising-grades

Public school “advocates” in Jacksonville were ecstatic last week at the good news that local schools are showing marked improvement.

Nine of the city’s high schools saw grades rise in 2011. Overall, 16 of 19 high schools scored A, B or C grades.

School Superintendent Ed Pratt-Dannals said proudly: “In addition, decreasing the number of lower performing schools (D or F) from 11 to three shows dramatic positive improvement.”

The good news came after the announcement that the graduation rate also had improved significantly.

However, the ecstatic advocates were at a loss to explain how this miracle happened.

They have been in a constant state of high dudgeon over heartless “cuts” to education that, they have been saying, would be the ruination of the schools.

Even worse, they say, some people are trying to foist charter schools, vouchers and the like upon the unsuspecting citizenry. Hide the children. The evil profit motive has entered the room.

They much prefer the way things were when the Democrats controlled the Legislature and would jack up public school spending. “For the kids,” you know.

Few bothered to point out that most of the money went into the paychecks of adults and that not one penny of it went to kids, or their struggling families.

But as those paychecks increased, the money flowing into the coffers of the teacher unions increased. Teacher unions being among the largest donors to Democrat political campaigns, that meant more campaign contributions for liberal politicians who would vote for even more spending.

Who says there’s no perpetual motion machine?

During this Golden Era, grades didn’t improve and by the end of it, more than half the students entering college could not read and write well enough to do college work, but what the heck?

Input is what matters to liberals. If you’re putting filet mignon into the grinder what does it matter if baloney comes out?

Then, in 1999, those knuckle-dragging nitwits in the Legislature decided to try something different. They began employing standards and accountability, and school choice – that is, giving poor students the same choices that politicians and others, such as public schoolteachers, have.

Suddenly, grades began improving.

Yet all we hear from The Blob is that more “resources” are needed (the stuff people who didn’t graduate from Harvard call “money.”) Liberals strenuously oppose the reforms that are producing results.

So, how is it that the schools are improving in Jacksonville after these Draconian cuts?

In search of an answer, I obtained a copy of the Comprehensive Annual Financial Report of the public schools in Duval County.

On pages 128 and 129 I learned that school spending went up every year from 2002 to 2011.

The total increase in spending over that period was more than 47 percent.

The school system’s accountants tell me the actual devastation for the 10-year-period, if you disregard capital outlay, was a 30 percent increase in spending.

Keeping up with growth? The report shows there were four fewer students in the schools last year than 10 years earlier.

If a 30 percent increase constitutes a lack of resources and reforms aren’t working, mysterious forces are obviously at work here. Any other Florida taxpayer worried about his school district’s fiscal health might also want to take a peek at its annual financial report.

Lloyd Brown was in the newspaper business nearly 50 years, beginning as a copy boy and retiring as editorial page editor of the Florida Times-Union in Jacksonville.

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Iowa Governor Branstad education plan includes new tests

Associated Press

By: Staff

January 6, 2011

http://www.omaha.com/article/20120106/news01/701079887/0

DES MOINES (AP) — Gov. Terry Branstad is asking the Iowa Legislature to approve new tests for students and tougher standards for aspiring teachers.

In a plan released Friday, Branstad called for the state to require a 3.0 grade point average for people seeking admission to teacher preparation programs. They also would need to pass a test demonstrating their competency in their proposed teaching subject.

Branstad also proposed that all preschool students and enrolled 4-year-olds be given a test to determine their skill levels. High school students would take end-of-course exams in key subjects, and 11th-graders would take a college entrance exam.

The governor said his education proposal was offered after he had spent months listening to expert opinions about how to bolster Iowa schools.

"We've worked for months to elevate the conversation about improving our schools," the governor said. "These proposals will put us on a path to make Iowa schools among the best in the world."

Branstad estimated his plan would cost an additional $25 million annually. He will propose how to raise that money when he sends a budget to the Legislature, which convenes Monday.

Last year the Legislature approved a $34.7 million increase in basic state aid to local schools, which would have the state spend $2.66 billion on elementary and secondary schools.

Some wrinkles remain. Those 11th graders and 4-year-olds who perform poorly on the tests will likely need to participate in a remedial program to bring them up to snuff.

"We'll work with educators all across the state on details of that," said Linda Fandel, Branstad's key education adviser.

There is plenty of meat in Branstad's proposal. Key proposals include:

» Requiring teaching candidates to pass a competency test in their subject matter; and once they begin teaching, get evaluated every

year instead of the current every three years.

» Broadening the path to alternative ways to get a teaching license, including a plan to allow professionals to move into teaching.

» Making seniority "a minor factor" when layoffs are required.

» Creating a task force to study changes in the way teachers are paid.

» Making it easier to create charter schools.

Branstad has made it clear he wants lawmakers to focus on education this year, warning that student performance on standardized tests has dropped from its once lofty ranking to the middle of the pack. He convened an education summit last summer and has traveled the state, heavily promoting his effort. He initially called for a tiered system of teacher pay that tied compensation to performance in the classroom, but decided to put that off until next year.

Kay lawmakers in both parties reacted warmly to the new package.

House Majority Leader Linda Upmeyer, R-Garner, applauded the new student testing requirements.

"Certainly we want our students to show they have achieved," Upmeyer said.

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, D-Des Moines, also gave the Republican governor credit.

"We want to work on this in a bipartisan way," McCarthy said. "The governor thus far has gone about this in the right way, because we've had a seat at the table."

McCarthy did question the amount of money being devoted to the effort. He said $8 million would be shifted from other education programs, with only $17 million in new money provided.

"I don't know that you can do a global-type reform proposal for $17 million," McCarthy said. "I think that $17 million for a major reform proposal, I don't know that that's adequate."

"We'll have to look at the governor's budget and see where those dollars come from," Upmeyer said. "Republicans will spend less than we take in, and if it fits inside that, we'll be able to live with that."

McCarthy and Upmeyer spoke during a taping of Iowa Public Television's "Iowa Press" program airing this weekend. It can be seen at 8:30 a.m. Saturday on Cox Cable's channel 115 and at 11:30 a.m. Sunday on channel 113.

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New Jersey: In the Suburbs, Charter Schools Raise Concerns About Local Control

New Jersey Spotlight

By: Marilyn Joyce Lehren

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Can a local school district block a charter from opening or refuse to fund it?

When a charter school opens in a gritty urban neighborhood, few parents and officials argue that kids in the district don't need an alternative to the local public schools. In a leafy New Jersey suburb -- which may be home to some of the best schools in the country -- charters can spark off a battle between skeptics and believers. The former often dismiss charters as "boutiques," and argue that they'll sap increasingly scarce dollars from local schools. The latter want their kids to have more choices and challenges -- like Mandarin language immersion -- and think their school taxes should pay for them.

Ultimately, the issue comes down to local control. Should school districts have the right to bar a charter from opening in their midst, as well as the right to refuse to pay for it?

Those questions were very much at issue on Friday night in Maplewood, an Essex County suburb, where about 100 parents, local officials, and state lawmakers showed up at a community center to protest a proposed world language school making its second try for charter approval.

“This is an example of the charter school movement gone off the rails,” said Marian Rabb, a Maplewood mother of two young children who helped organize the rally.

Children, meanwhile, decorated colorful anti-charter signs, and one kindergartener tugged at the knees of her mother making an impassioned speech for passage of the bill that would give communities a local vote on charter schools being allowed to open.

Sen. Richard Codey (D-27th) held high a homemade sign then went on to blast the administration’s plans to privatize education, end teacher tenure, and open more charter schools. “We have not seen an attack on a public school system like this ever in our lifetime . . . so ugly and determined,” he said.

The target of the rally is a school led by a licensed acupuncturist who wants to immerse elementary students in Mandarin Chinese. Its application, which was rejected less than four months ago by the Christie administration, has since been retooled to cover fewer towns, and no longer would encompass the governor's hometown of Livingston, as well as Milburn-Short Hills.

The parents from those sending districts (Union was also originally proposed) were the most vocal against the schools. But new parents have stepped up, collecting more than 1,600 signatures opposing the school, and inundating the charter office with letters and petitions.

The Maplewood protest is far from alone. Across the state, in towns including Highland Park, Princeton, Montclair, East Brunswick and Cherry Hill, similar battles are raging. The Maplewood Mandarin proposal is emblematic of many of the charters proposed for these suburban communities. They are called boutiques, centered on niche approaches like immersing students in Mandarin or Hebrew. They especially spark resentment from parents who say the specialty schools will drain dwindling public funds from well-functioning school districts.

The role of these experimental schools -- designed 16 years ago as “laboratories for innovation” -- and how they are approved and evaluated is expected to be among the top education reforms put before state lawmakers this session.

“I’m not opposed to charter schools per se,” said Assemblywoman Mila Jasey (D-27th District), a strong advocate for charter school reform. “However, that role needs to be defined and carefully laid out.”

Jasey proposed legislation signed into law by Gov. Chris Christie that would allow conversion of private and parochial schools into charter schools.

Another bill would allow for local votes on charters, and a third would require financial and educational transparency and accountability. The local vote measure has been roundly rejected by the Christie administration and some of the Democratic leadership, who fear it will effectively stop charter schools from opening anywhere. The transparency law is stalled in the Senate Budget Committee.

Despite the setbacks, these reforms remain in play behind the scenes in talks on a comprehensive overhaul of the 1996 charter law that could loosen some restrictions and add others, observers of the process said.

"We're optimistic that local control over the creation of new charter schools will happen during the forthcoming legislative session,” said Julia Sass Rubin, a Rutgers professor and one of the founding members of Save Our Schools NJ, a grassroots group that has been critical of the state's charter school law.

There are 26,730 schoolchildren enrolled in 80 charter schools, more than half of them operating in New Jersey’s poorest cities. That number grew 16.7 percent last year, according to the New Jersey Charter School Association, but still represents just 2 percent of all children enrolled in New Jersey’s public schools.

The state Department of Education last year adopted a more rigorous review to determine the strengths of the proposed programs, granting just four charters approval last September out of a class of 55. The denied applicants received coaching on ways to make their proposals stronger.

Last fall, three weeks after being rejected and despite strong objections in their communities, two schools in Essex County resubmitted their application for “fast-track” approval that will be announced on January 17. The applications for Hua Mei in Maplewood (trying for a second time) and Quest Academy Charter High School in nearby Montclair (making its fifth try) remain in the running, according to the Christie administration.

“It’s a perversion of the charter laws,” said Assemblyman John McKeon (D-27th District) arriving to protest Hua Mei, which would also draw students from West Orange, the community where he lives and served as mayor.

Hua Mei has changed its application most radically, dropping two sending districts that had voiced the loudest and strongest challenge, the blue-ribbon school districts of Livingston and Millburn-Short Hills.

It’s the same tactic employed by another proposed charter for Hebrew-language instruction after it met stiff opposition in Highland Park. Now trying for a fourth time, Tikum Olam has dropped Highland Park from the application process, and now says the majority of students will be recruited from New Brunswick and Edison.

The charter schools, though, could still be permitted to enroll students from those towns, up to 10 percent of the total student body of the sending school districts’ tab, and parents have not backed down. “Why do communities have to keep doing this, keep fighting to control their schools?” Rubin asked. “It’s such a broken process.”

Hua Mei now intends to serve students from South Orange-Maplewood and West Orange, which already has a Mandarin program in place for Grades 8-12 and recently expanded to offer advanced placement.

A review of Hua Mei's applications show other changes as well, including increasing the pay of teachers hired for five K-2 classrooms where students would learn lessons mostly in Mandarin and adding a special education teacher for students with special needs.

Jasey told her hometown supporters -- she served on the South Orange-Maplewood Board of Education before being elected to Assembly -- that she had a conversation last week with acting commission Christopher Cerf. "I've told him if this decision is not the one we're looking for, then he has seen nothing yet." In letters to Cerf, the South Orange-Maplewood school district has hammered away at specifics within the proposal, including how it will fund recruiting students, hire teachers, and develop curriculum with no start-up money.

West Orange's superintendent, Dr. Anthony Cavanna, told Cerf he is "adamantly opposed to a charter school that would be a duplication of well established and highly regarded [Mandarin] programs" already in place in West Orange schools.

McKeon and Jasey followed the rally with a mailing to residents in West Orange, South Orange and Maplewood. Letters arrived on Saturday saying they agreed with the superintendent's analyses sent to Cerf and their strong opposition. The Hua Mei proposal, the assemblymen said, "would divert funding from successful public schools to a charter school that, by its design, cannot be replicated in a traditional public school setting."

The sending districts would provide $1.91 million to the charter school its first year, according to Hua Mei's financial statement. That's to cover 90 percent of tuition for any student who chose to attend, an issue that rankles local taxpayers. "I want to see all our tax dollars -- and there are quite a few of them -- sent to public schools at which all our children can take advantage of them," said Melanie Hochberg Giger of Maplewood, who brought her two preschoolers to the rally.

Outside, two supporters of Hua Mei talked with reporters against a simple black and white "Yes Charter" sign. "I respect both sides of the argument," said Adam Kraemer, a West Orange resident, "but there is room to improve the fiscal and education polices of the [suburban] districts . . . Even in healthy districts there is room for improvement and perhaps healthy competition could be beneficial."

Hua Mei's lead founder, Jutta Gassner-Snyder identifies herself as a parent and diplomate of Orient medicine practicing acupuncture and Chinese herbology in her letter to Cerf. She says, "I not only wish for my daughter to gain fluency in Mandarin, but also to help her become a responsible, compassionate global citizen with a wide-reaching set of skills that will give her the confidence and ability to compete alongside our Asian counterparts."

Proponents say the school will better prepare pupils for the increasing demands of a global marketplace and that the charter school will not be as big a financial drain as districts claim because the district would not have to educate those children. The founders also point to the interest of Chinese language education in the area, including two weekend-immersion Chinese schools and a private, immersion preschool and K-2 school. Because they are fee-based they limit who can attend, the application says.

If approved next week, Hua Mei would be working under a tight deadline to recruit students and hire teachers in order to open as planned in September. The school intends to pay $96,000 a year to share space at a former parochial school in Maplewood, which recently also rented classrooms to a private school for older children in Grades 5-12 with learning, behavioral and social challenges. It is unclear how the two schools would share the building.

The pressure is expected to remain on the state Department of Education as it decides on the future of charters like Hua Mei in New Jersey's suburbs.

"Hopefully we won't have to be here every six months," said Brian Osborne, the schools superintendent in South Orange-Maplewood. "But if we have to, we'll be here."

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Minnesota education leaders seek ideas from teachers

Echo Press
By: Staff
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http://www.echopress.com/event/article/id/90932/group/homepage/

Education Minnesota (EdMN) and the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) have formed a joint venture with The VIVA Teachers' Project to conduct an online "Idea Exchange" to get teachers' ideas about designing and implementing Minnesota's new principal and teacher evaluation systems.

Education Minnesota (EdMN) and the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) have formed a joint venture with The VIVA Teachers' Project to conduct an online "Idea Exchange" to get teachers' ideas about designing and implementing Minnesota's new principal and teacher evaluation systems.

This partnership builds on the education reform agenda set forth by the Governor Mark Dayton and the Minnesota State Legislature this

past year. A key component of that agenda is ensuring that every Minnesota student has a great school, a great teacher and a great principal. Supporting and evaluating our teachers and leaders and giving them meaningful feedback is essential to our vision of world-class, nation leading schools in Minnesota. This feedback will assist in updating and creating new professional standards and supports for school educators that make sense and get results.

Through this “Idea Exchange,” teachers across the statewill ensure their voices are heard. Their input will be invaluable during the process of developing these evaluation systems, according to education leaders.

The Idea Exchange operates online in two phases. Made possible through a $61,000 grant from the Bush Foundation, Phase I will include a moderated brainstorming session where Minnesota teachers will be asked to share their ideas about the role of a school principal as well as his or her impact on student and teacher performance, and exchange wisdom gained from their classroom experience. During Phase II, a small collaborative made up of teachers, will summarize and synthesize the ideas into a written report. Members of the writing collaborative will be chosen based on technology-driven quantitative analysis of the quantity and quality of their participation in Phase I. They will present their recommendations during an in-person meeting with Governor Dayton and MDE Commissioner Brenda Cassellius in February.

“Teacher voice in decisions that impact them is critical. This project will help us bring the conversation to all our teachers across the state. Principals and teachers work together every day on behalf of our kids, and this innovative strategy to bring professional voices and opinions into our decision-making process will help us ensure more robust meaningful evaluations,” MDE Commissioner Brenda Cassellius said. “We are excited to be at the forefront, using technology to engage our teachers and gain their input in this very important discussion. We are especially pleased to partner with Education Minnesota as we continue to model collaboration that works for teachers, principals and our Minnesota students.”

The VIVA Teacher Project recently completed an Idea Exchange for Chicago Public Schools (CPS) in which Chicago Public School teachers offered 49 innovative ideas for how to better use time in school as a part of Chicago’s plan to revamp the school calendar and day next year. CPS is currently using their report as a primary resource in redesigning the school calendar.

According to Education Minnesota President Tom Dooher, "Teachers are the key component to student success, and the voices of teachers are critical in helping to build learning environments that will help students reach their potential. We are excited that the VIVA Idea Exchange will allow authentic classroom ideas and experience to be recognized and shared with policy makers and the public. This project represents a great opportunity to engage our members on how to best evaluate principals and their leadership.”

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