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To:

CC:

Date: Mon, 5/23/2011 10:41:00 AM

Subject: Foundation for Florida's Future, Key Reads: 5/23/11

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NATIONAL NEWS

- 1) [State Legislatures Notch Major K-12 Policy Changes](#); Cavanagh – Education Week
- 2) [In weekly address, Obama pushes for overhaul of nation's education laws](#); Werner – Associated Press

FLORIDA NEWS

- 3) [Miami-Dade district 'franchises' popular schools](#); McGrory – Miami Herald
- 4) [School bill removes citizens from textbook reviews](#); Whittenburg – Tampa Tribune
- 5) [Charter school movement exploding in Florida](#); McGrory – Miami Herald

STATE NEWS

- 6) [Tenn. charter schools bill headed to governor](#); Staff – Associated Press
- 7) [Nevada teacher tenure bills advance to Senate amid disagreements about union roles](#); Rindels – Associated Press
- 8) [Bill to create charter schools in Maine advances](#); Staff – Associated Press

NATIONAL NEWS

State Legislatures Notch Major K-12 Policy Changes

Education Week

By: Sean Cavanagh

May 25, 2011

http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/05/25/32legisoverview_ep.h30.html?k=VPUFIADWEs1JHq1pH57Nh04LdEScRjufRTAK&cmp=clp-edweek

The frenetic legislative season now finished or wrapping up in many states has brought big changes to education policy, some forged through bipartisan compromise, others only after hyperpartisan battles.

Republican leaders who swept into office last fall—when the GOP won a majority of governorships and took control of both legislative chambers in 25 states—wasted no time pushing through ambitious and often controversial education agendas. Their hardest-fought victories include the passage of laws that curb teachers' collective bargaining rights and tie educators' tenure, advancement, and pay to their performance, including their ability to improve student test scores.

Wisconsin Republican Gov. Scott Walker's successful push to strip teachers and most other public employees of many bargaining powers drew strong objections from Democrats and massive protests from teachers and other public workers, who took part in some of the largest demonstrations the state had seen since the Vietnam War. Similar Republican-backed laws that passed in Indiana, Ohio, and Idaho also drew major protests.

Yet many states, with much less fanfare, passed significant measures in areas including the creation or expansion of voucher programs, academic standards, teacher certification, and charter school expansion—in some cases with the backing of both major political parties.

"It's pretty unprecedented, when you look at how much education legislation has been enacted around the country," said Patrick McGuinn, an associate professor of political science and education at Drew University, in Madison, N.J. "Rare is the state that was not legislating on education issues."

Budget Backdrop

Lawmakers went to work during bleak financial conditions, with the vast majority of states facing budget shortfalls in the coming fiscal year. Some states responded by cutting money for K-12 education—which makes up a huge chunk of state budgets—while others protected school funding.

In some states, the impact of new laws may not be known for months. The Wisconsin, Ohio, and Idaho collective bargaining measures face challenges on a variety of legal and political fronts. And officials in many states confront difficult questions about crafting and implementing specific regulations to meet the broad requirements of new laws, particularly in areas like teacher evaluation.

More than half the states have completed or are scheduled to finish their regular legislative sessions by the end of this month, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Republicans emerged from the 2010 elections in control of 29 governors' offices and of more state legislative seats than at any time since the Great Depression. Although education was not a dominant theme in either the state or federal races last year, numerous governors and lawmakers, upon taking office, unveiled proposals to bring dramatic changes to school policy.

The most contentious was almost certainly Gov. Walker's plan to restrict collective bargaining by teachers and many other public employees to wage issues, rather than working conditions, and to limit wage increases. ("[State-by-State Battle on Bargaining Rights Continuing to Unfold.](#)" March 9, 2011.)

After a prolonged legislative standoff with Democratic state lawmakers, Republican Wisconsin legislators muscled the measure through, although a legal action filed by a county district attorney is challenging the legality of the procedure used to pass it. Other measures that restricted teachers' collective bargaining rights, such as an Idaho bill that became law last month, received less attention, despite their potentially broad impact. The Idaho law limits bargaining to wages and benefits, phases out tenure for teachers, and ties teacher evaluations to student performance.

It was part of a broader, three-part legislative package that changes school funding, links teachers' and administrators' pay to performance, and emphasizes virtual learning—moves that supporters say will help provide schools in the rural, Western state of 280,000 students with more stable financing.

"We had to act," said Tom Luna, the Idaho state schools chief and a Republican, who backed the measures. "We couldn't just sit back and have our education system collapse under its own weight."

Unions' Role in Debate

The Idaho Education Association, an affiliate of the 3.2 million-member National Education Association, and individuals are making a push to collect enough signatures to have the measures placed on the state ballot in 2012, in the hope that voters will overturn them.

The whole process of promoting and approving the legislation "felt very degrading and dishonest," said Sherri Wood, the president of the 13,000-member state teachers' group. "Our hope is that ... we can bring people to the table, including teachers, who know what's needed to improve schools."

Other states approved major education legislation with bipartisan support.

A measure in Illinois, which will link teacher tenure, advancement, and layoff policies to teacher performance rather than seniority, won overwhelming approval from both parties in the Democratic-controlled legislature. Gov. Pat Quinn, also a Democrat, has voiced support for the proposal.

The Illinois measure also won the backing of the Illinois Federation of Teachers and the Illinois Education Association, although the Chicago Teachers Union withdrew its backing because of what it said were unacceptable changes made late in the bill's passage through the Statehouse.

Nonetheless, the legislation won praise—including from U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, a former chief of the Chicago schools—as an example of unions' willingness to collaborate with lawmakers from both parties in the name of school improvement.

Jonah Edelman, the chief executive officer of Stand for Children, an advocacy organization that backed the Illinois legislation and similar measures around the country, said passage of the Illinois proposal offers a far more useful blueprint to other states interested in making changes to teacher policy than do laws such as Wisconsin's.

"There are some states where these reforms weren't a particularly heavy lift," Mr. Edelman said. By contrast, legislative efforts like the one in Democratic-dominated Illinois are "encouraging, because of their transferability to other states," he said.

"Were these just about red states making reforms," he said, "they wouldn't be anything to write home about."

Mr. Edelman and others said the momentum behind some of the state activity on improving teacher quality around the country could be traced to the Obama administration's Race to the Top competition, which invited states to put forward plans to improve schools in exchange for a share of \$4 billion in federal cash.

Illinois lawmakers last year approved a law that tied teachers' and administrators' evaluations to student performance. The recently approved measure is a logical extension of that law, Mr. Edelman said, because it links decisions about hiring, firing, and tenure to educators' on-the-job ability.

Fiscal Squeeze

Forty-four states faced projected budget shortfalls for fiscal 2012, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a Washington research organization, and those issues loomed over many of the policy decisions and political arguments this year.

Many new Republican governors, like Florida's Rick Scott, were elected on promises to cut the size of government. Florida lawmakers have passed a \$70 billion fiscal 2012 state budget, which the governor has yet to approve, that makes reductions across programs, including cuts of 8 percent to K-12 education, or roughly \$540 per student.

Other states have sought to hold the line on school funding. California Gov. Jerry Brown and lawmakers agreed to a budget for next year that will keep state funding level, as they made deep cuts in other areas of government. But the state still faces a \$10 billion projected budget shortfall. The governor, a Democrat elected last November, says the state will be forced to cut K-12 budgets unless voters are given the chance to support a series of tax increases and extensions. Republican lawmakers so far have refused to support that plan. ("[Georgia Ruling Leaves Charters' Fate Uncertain.](#)" May 20, 2011.)

California and other states have seen an increase in tax revenues recently. But, overall, those cash infusions will do little to make up the vast ground states lost during the recent, deep recession, said Kim Rueben, a senior fellow at the Urban Institute, in Washington. Total state revenues might not return to 2008 levels until 2013 or 2014, and as a result, school districts face the potential for layoffs and program cuts over the next few years, she said.

Despite difficult conditions, a number of states also approved major changes to their systems of standards and testing. New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Utah approved policies that will assign schools letter grades of A to F, based on academic performance, a policy pioneered by Jeb Bush during his tenure as Florida's governor.

State Rep. Dennis J. Roch, a Republican who helped craft the New Mexico legislation, said letter grades give parents much more digestible information on school performance than is offered through the labels assigned by the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

"No one, except people in academia, know what they mean," Mr. Roch said of the federal descriptions. "Everyone knows what A

through F means. They know it's an authentic measure of what schools are doing.”

[\(Back to top\)](#)

In weekly address, Obama pushes for overhaul of nation's education laws

Associated Press

By: Erica Werner

May 21, 2011

http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/in-weekly-address-obama-pushes-for-overhaul-of-nations-education-laws/2011/05/21/AF7Mze8G_story.html

Trying to make his case for overhauling the nation's education laws, President Obama is highlighting progress at a Tennessee high school as evidence that the proper incentives can help all schools succeed.

Obama focused his weekly radio and Internet address Saturday on Memphis's Booker T. Washington High School, where the president delivered the commencement address Monday.

Graduation rates at the school, which is in a poor, crime-ridden neighborhood, have risen impressively in just three years. The school won a national competition to secure the president as its speaker by demonstrating how it overcame challenges through innovations such as separate freshman academies for boys and girls.

“Booker T. Washington High School is no longer a story about what's gone wrong in education,” Obama said. “It's a story about how we can set it right.

“We need to encourage this kind of change all across America. We need to reward the reforms that are driven not by Washington, but by principals and teachers and parents. That's how we'll make progress in education — not from the top down, but from the bottom up.”

Obama promoted his Race to the Top initiative, which has states compete for education money. But the program has drawn criticism, and Republicans on Capitol Hill are unwilling to devote new money to it. Obama also renewed his call for Congress to send him a rewrite of No Child Left Behind, the nation's governing education law.

“We need to promote reform that gets results while encouraging communities to figure out what's best for their kids. That why it's so important that Congress replace No Child Left Behind this year — so schools have that flexibility,” Obama said. “Reform just can't wait.”

There is bipartisan agreement that the inflexible, testing-heavy law needs to change. But prospects for an overhaul this year don't seem bright, given that the economy, jobs and deficit are dominating the agenda.

Rep. John Kline (R-Minn.), chairman of the House Education and Workforce Committee, said recently that a deadline Obama set in March for a rewrite of the law by September would be impossible to meet.

Republicans devoted their weekly address to energy.

Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas accused the Obama administration of over-regulating and not doing enough to spur production at a time of \$4-a-gallon gasoline. Obama last week directed his administration to step up U.S. oil production through measures such as extending existing leases in the Gulf of Mexico and off Alaska's coast.

Hutchison said the administration's policies remain too restrictive.

“We call on him to put policies in place that cut the bureaucratic red tape and put Americans to work doing it,” she said.

Analysts and many lawmakers acknowledge there's little Washington can do that immediately would affect gas prices.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

FLORIDA NEWS

Miami-Dade district 'franchises' popular schools

Miami Herald

By: Kathleen McGroary

May 22, 2011

<http://www.miamiherald.com/2011/05/22/2229324/miami-dade-district-franchises.html>

When Miami-Dade schools Superintendent Alberto Carvalho opened a science-themed high school in Homestead last year, it didn't take long to come up with a name.

The new state-of-the-art school would be called MAST at Homestead.

In public school parlance, the MAST name carries weight. The original MAST Academy, a maritime studies high school on Virginia Key, is one of the highest performing and most competitive public schools in the country.

In opening a second MAST, Carvalho hit on a unique idea: the franchising of public schools.

The district is taking it a step further next year. A third MAST will open at Jose Marti Middle in Hialeah.

An expansion of two other public school brands, New World School of the Arts and iPrep, is also in the works.

“We’re leveraging well-known school names and exporting the concept to other parts of the district,” Carvalho said.

Franchising schools makes economic sense, Carvalho said.

Each year, the school system spends millions of dollars transporting students to its signature magnet programs, many of which are located in central Miami-Dade. The district can cut those transportation costs over time by opening additional high-demand programs in a variety of neighborhoods.

Additionally, branding a new school with a recognizable name gives it immediate credibility, Carvalho said.

“You also don’t have to market the concept because it is already a high-quality name,” he added.

The original MAST — the Maritime and Science Technology Academy — opened in 1991 in Key Biscayne, and quickly became known as one of the best public schools in South Florida.

Known for its challenging, science-based curriculum and stunning views of Biscayne Bay, MAST has earned an A or a B grade every year since the state Department of Education started grading schools. It is routinely recognized by U. S. News and World Reports as one of the 100 best schools in the nation.

MAST at Homestead — that’s the Medical Academy for Science and Technology — opened at the beginning of the 2010-11 school year.

Already, there are more than 900 students on the waiting list. Principal Greg Zawyer said he has received inquiries from interested parents in New York, Arizona and China.

MAST at Homestead has the same high admission standards and challenging curriculum as its namesake. Applicants must have taken earth and space science, and algebra I in middle school. They must also have a 2.0 GPA or better and no discipline problems.

Once admitted, ninth-graders take two science classes (biology and anatomy/physiology) and honors geometry. They also take the required English and social studies classes, and choose from electives that include German and Spanish language classes.

“They want us to be the best,” said student body Vice President Karla Quiñones, 15.

That applies to both academics and behavior, Karla said. “When you are wearing a MAST uniform shirt, you better behave,” Karla said. “You are representing one of the best schools around.”

MAST at Homestead won’t be the only new school with a recognizable name.

A third MAST, this one with a focus on engineering and technology, will open this year at Jose Marti Middle in Hialeah.

Carvalho also plans to open a conservatory-style New World School of the Arts at Polly Mays Middle in the Richmond Heights area.

And he’ll launch two new iPrep programs within existing high schools in Southwest Miami-Dade: Miami Killian and Felix Varela.

The principals are looking forward to having the iPrep program, which enables high-performing students to design their own curriculum and conduct much of their studies online.

Only months old, MAST at Homestead has yet to reach its full potential.

The school currently has 70 ninth-grade students who take classes at the Gateway Environmental K-8 Center, while their future school is being retrofitted with high-tech labs and libraries. In January 2012, MAST at Homestead will move to the old Homestead Hospital, which the Miami-Dade School Board bought for \$7.4 million in 2007.

MAST at Homestead will add one grade level each year until it houses students from the ninth through 12th grades. Over time, it will grow to accommodate 800 students, Zawyer said.

But already, MAST at Homestead seems to be living up to expectations.

On a recent afternoon, the ninth-graders dissected cats — an exercise usually reserved for biology students at the college level.

For students like Kiani Oro, 15, it was the first taste of what it might be like to be a doctor. After adjusting her goggles and blue rubber gloves, she picked up the specimen and began identifying the body parts.

"It's good for me to get the experience early," said Kiani, who wants to be a pediatric lung specialist.

Kiani, who lives in South Dade and would have struggled to get to MAST on Virginia Key, said she wasn't surprised to be dissecting a cat in her first year of high school. "This is MAST," she said. "They're not playing around."

[\(Back to top\)](#)

School bill removes citizens from textbook reviews

Tampa Tribune

By: Catherine Whittenburg

May 20, 2011

<http://www2.tbo.com/news/education-news/2011/may/20/school-bill-removes-citizens-from-textbook-reviews-ar-208664/>

Average citizens may lose what limited role they have now in the state's adoption of public school textbooks -- a proposal from the GOP-controlled Legislature that has infuriated conservative activists already accusing the state of selecting biased instructional materials.

The law change appears in the middle of a 77-page bill which contains myriad proposals affecting Florida's public schools, from increasing virtual education to loosening the rules for class-size compliance. Scott received the bill from lawmakers on Tuesday and has until June 1 to act on it.

The section affecting textbook adoption would replace the state's formal review committees -- which include lay citizens, teachers, teacher supervisors and a school board member -- with a trio of subject-matter experts appointed by the state education commissioner.

School districts would appoint teachers and content supervisors to rate the practical usability of the texts recommended by the state's experts.

That overhaul has outraged some activists in the Tea Party and related groups, which last year helped propel more Republicans into the GOP-controlled Legislature, and Scott into the governor's mansion.

"We the People' should have a say on what textbooks OUR CHILDREN read," Tea Party activist Shari Krass wrote recently in a letter to Scott.

Krass and activists like her believe some texts used by Florida schools are slanted to favor Islam over Judaism and Christianity.

A former math teacher in Broward County, Krass founded a group called the Textbook Action Team to fight that perceived bias. TAT had submitted a list of lay volunteers to serve on the committee scheduled to review social studies texts this fall. When Krass learned of the pending legislation to up-end that process, she urged Scott to veto it.

"This legislation 'ties our hands' -- where we will be restricted in our ability to influence our children's education," she wrote.

Marti Coley, who chairs the House K-12 schools budget committee that first proposed the change, described it as "a simplification of the process" that coincides with the state's move toward using more digital instructional materials.

"Everything we did was about how can we make it easier, and focused on the content -- how does the content really deliver the Sunshine State Standards," Florida's curriculum requirements for K-12 public schools, said Coley, R-Marianna.

Content experts, she said, will best determine that.

"I could read a science textbook and not necessarily know if it indeed did a good job of delivering that content. I could tell you, as a former English teacher, whether it is grammatically correct or logical in its presentation. But I couldn't tell you if the content was adequate or accurate. Using experts in those fields seems logical to me."

Krass responded, "That, to me, is total garbage," arguing that less inaccurate or biased material will slip by undetected if more people with diverse backgrounds vet it.

David Simmons, chairman of the Senate's K-12 schools budget panel, said the provision would minimize the risk of inappropriate relationships between committee members and publishers submitting texts for their approval.

Publishers have been criticized for decades as wining, dining and otherwise inappropriately wooing textbook reviewers and committees around the country.

Simmons, R-Altamonte Springs, insisted that he was not pointing the finger at specific reviewers in Florida. But the change, he said, "can help assure that there is no potential conflict of interest between those who are reviewing instructional materials and the publishing industry."

Deltona resident Sean O'Neal, a member of Krass' Textbook Action Team, said that lay volunteers would be more objective and less likely than hired experts to have connections to publishers. "You're going to get better selections from people not being paid to do it."

Richard Swier, the Sarasota editor of the right-wing RedCounty.com website, said the existing review committees have "more than enough room for experts."

Swier, who holds an education doctorate, was once director of Broward Principals and Assistants Association. He also speaks to Tea Party groups and belongs to The United West, an activist group that describes itself as "uniting the West to defeat Shariah Islam."

Regarding textbooks, Swier said his goal is "for parents to actually have a serious vote in the situation. I want them to be able to be empowered."

The ACLU of Florida, which has battled conservative activists in the past over the teaching of evolution, was less concerned about the change in textbook adoption.

"So long as the people choosing the texts can honor the principles of academic merit over a political cause, it should not matter if they are experts, parents or members of the community at large," ACLU spokesman Derek Newton said.

But Marty Kiar, the ranking Democrat on the House K-12 budget committee, said that while he didn't agree with TAT's politics, he does agree that "average, everyday citizens should have significant input, and that should not be taken away."

Coley, the House chairwoman, agreed, saying she wished that critics had approached her about the issue sooner.

Following an interview about the bill, Coley consulted the state Department of Education about implementing the legislation in a way that will still give parents and community members some say in the process.

"We haven't figured out how we're going to do it, but I've started the gears in motion to figure it out," she said afterward. "I do think it's a legitimate concern."

[\(Back to top\)](#)

Charter school movement exploding in Florida

Miami Herald

By: Kathleen McGrory

May 21, 2011

<http://www.miamiherald.com/2011/05/21/2228377/the-charter-school-explosion-and.html>

Mornings at the Charter School of Excellence are an all-out attack on reading.

At 9 a.m. sharp, the children divide into small groups, spread out across the Fort Lauderdale campus and spend 90 minutes studying phonics, vocabulary and reading comprehension. To keep the student-to-teacher ratio low, every instructor in the building — the P.E. coach, fine arts teacher and teachers-in-training included — is assigned to a group.

The strategy is working. Despite a 71 percent poverty rate among students, the school has received eight consecutive A grades from the state.

This is exactly what Florida's charter school pioneers envisioned when they launched the movement in the early 1990s. They argued that public schools set free from school board politics and big district bureaucracies could tailor their programs to pupils' needs, helping students to achieve.

Since then, the movement has exploded. More than 58,000 children now attend charter schools in Miami-Dade and Broward — nearly a tenth of all public school students in South Florida.

That number is almost certain to balloon. State legislation passed last week will make it easier for new charter schools to open and existing ones to expand. Another new law will allow for the creation of virtual charter schools, which will enable students and teachers to connect over the Internet without brick-and-mortar buildings.

Some of the region's charters are among the best schools in the country: Mater Academy Charter Middle/High in Hialeah Gardens, the Archimedean Schools in West Kendall and the Charter Schools of Excellence in Broward, to name a few. But others are places where students are taught in tool sheds, textbooks are in short supply and public dollars are used to pad principals' pockets.

The big picture? The bulk of South Florida charter schools perform no better nor any worse than traditional public schools.

Charter school advocates, a powerful lobbying force in Tallahassee, contend that competition from charters has raised the bar for all public schools.

“This empowers parents by giving them options,” said Robert Haag, president of the Florida Consortium of Public Charter Schools and superintendent of the Charter Schools of Excellence.

But opponents fear the charter movement has drained local districts of revenue while creating a parallel educational universe — one where there are no rules and no standards but hefty profits.

THEIR OWN GUIDELINES

Like traditional public schools, charter schools are funded by sales and property taxes. But unlike traditional schools, which are run by locally elected school boards in Florida, charters are managed by independent governing boards. They can hire and fire teachers as they please, pay whatever salaries they want, and cherry pick the best students, leaving struggling ones to the traditional schools.

Charter schools are subject to state accountability measures. Students take the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Tests and schools receive grades. If a charter school receives back-to-back failing grades, its local school board can close it.

Charter schools are also businesses that must stay in the black to stay open. In Florida, they are run by a combination of non-profits and for-profit companies.

At their best, charter schools are teaching and learning laboratories — places where best practices are put into action and get results.

“The districts will be the first to tell you, they run a big bureaucracy and are very slow to make changes,” said Jonathan Hage, president of the Broward-based company Charter Schools USA, which runs the Renaissance and Keys Gate schools. “They’re like a ship in the ocean. We’re like a little key boat.”

Take the Archimedean Schools in West Kendall.

The schools, housed in a castle-like building that calls to mind the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, enroll about 750 students from kindergarten through high school. Students at all levels study classical Greek mathematics — in Greek — and spend an additional hour studying traditional mathematics each day. Greek language and philosophy are also built into the rigorous curriculum.

Archimedean has become a hub of academic excellence. Each year, its students earn some of the highest FCAT scores in the state. The school routinely wins national competitions in math and science. More than 900 children are on the waiting list, founder George Kafkoulis said.

Other charter schools fill a specific niche. The South Florida Autism Charter School was started in 2009 by a group of parents who said the public school district lacked programs for autistic children. The City of Hialeah became a partner, offering the school space in a public library.

But at their worst, charter schools have shoddy academic and financial records.

At Rise Academy in Homestead, for example, students had scant access to textbooks and supplies, state education officials said. Student bathrooms were rarely cleaned and lunches were stored in unsanitary conditions. And bank records revealed thousands of school dollars had been spent on clothing, restaurants, a pickup truck and Orlando theme parks, while teachers went without paychecks.

The Miami-Dade School Board stepped in and closed Rise last summer. The state Board of Education overturned the decision, saying Rise hadn’t had a chance to defend itself. But Rise Academy never reopened, and law enforcement sources say the Florida Department of Law Enforcement and the Miami-Dade Schools Police are investigating the school.

Since 1995, 23 Miami-Dade charter schools have closed their doors for academic or financial reasons. Of the total, 14 opted to close themselves; the remaining nine were ordered closed by the Miami-Dade School Board.

In Broward County, eight have closed. Three of them were shut by the Broward School Board.

SIMILAR SCORES

The bulk of South Florida’s charter schools are on par with traditional public schools when evaluated based on standardized test scores.

On last year’s state exams in math and reading, traditional public school students in Miami-Dade, Broward and statewide performed slightly better than their charter school counterparts, but not by much, state data shows. (See chart).

In Miami-Dade, 51 percent of traditional public schools earned an A grade last year, as compared with 56 percent of charter schools. But a larger percentage of charter schools earned a failing grade than traditional public schools.

In Broward, 59 percent of traditional public schools earned an A grade. Half of charter schools did the same.

“Many, many studies reach the same conclusion,” said Diane Ravitch, a former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education under Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton and a charter school opponent. “Charters don’t get better results than regular public schools.”

Ravitch, now a research professor at the New York University Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development, said charter schools often “skim” high-performing kids out of neighborhoods, and advise low-performing kids and kids with disabilities to go elsewhere.

“When they take special-ed kids, they tend to be those with mildest disabilities,” Ravitch said. “Thus, the regular public schools get overburdened with most challenging students.”

Charter school leaders deny skimming students. They point out that some charters cater to children with disabilities or struggling students.

Fernando Zulueta, a charter school pioneer and founder of the charter management company Academica, said the model is not a panacea.

“As a movement, we advocate for quality,” Zulueta said.

Overall, Zulueta said, charter schools are the pennywise alternative because they generate equal outcomes at a lower cost. (Charter schools receive fewer dollars for facilities than traditional public schools.) They also give parents more control over their child’s education, he said.

The explosion of charter schools has led to a tug-of-war between school districts and charter school operators, both of whom receive state funding based on how many children enroll. In a time of cuts to education, Florida’s countywide school districts need every dollar they can get to fund their massive operations. Charter schools, which function like private businesses, need the money to stay afloat.

Both the Miami-Dade and Broward School Boards have responded by increasing the number of magnet programs to keep students from leaving their schools. An example: When parents started talking about the South Florida Autism Charter Schools, the Miami-Dade district hurried along plans to open a specialized center for autistic children at Blue Lakes Elementary, a traditional public school.

The friction between the districts and charter schools is palpable. Charter school operators say school districts erect roadblocks to prevent new charter schools from opening.

“It’s like going to McDonalds and asking them to license a Burger King,” Haag said. “They don’t make it easy on you. We’re the competition.”

School districts, however, say they don’t have enough control. And when a charter school fails, districts say they are left to pick up the pieces.

THE FUTURE?

Many people see the expansion of charter schools as a Republican effort to undermine public schools and teachers’ unions. It’s clear that Republicans in the Florida Legislature — aided by newly minted Gov. Rick Scott — are the driving force behind encouraging more and more charters. But Democrats also support them. President Barack Obama is a vocal advocate of charter schools, as is his secretary of education, former Chicago schools chief Arne Duncan.

Charter school operators and management companies maintain a strong presence in Tallahassee, contributing thousands of dollars to both Republicans and Democrats. One Broward-based charter school operator, Charter Schools USA, donated \$65,000 to political parties, candidates and political action committees in the 2010 election cycle, public records show. The movement has lobbyists (including former Republican Party of Florida Chairman Al Cardenas) and considerable influence. Zulueta’s brother-in-law is state Rep. Erik Fresen, vice chairman of the pre-K-12 education policy committee.

Big dollars are also at play. In Florida and across the United States, the charter school movement has spurred a multi-billion dollar industry for school operators, consultants and management companies. Charter school operators aren’t likely to get rich overnight, but experts say the field can be lucrative for entrepreneurs, executives, consultants and investors.

Virtual charter schools could be an even bigger cash cows for education entrepreneurs because they don’t require much overhead.

Next year, Miami-Dade predicts charter school enrollment will grow by 5,350 students to reach 40,656. Traditional school enrollment is expected to dip by 4,247 students to 305,697.

Is this the future of public education?

As long as parents like Nilda Catala keep flocking to charter schools, it seems likely.

Catala enrolled her son in Mater Academy Charter Middle/High in Hialeah Gardens so he wouldn’t have to attend the

neighborhood middle school. She chose Mater because students must wear uniforms and the challenging curriculum was designed to prepare pupils for college.

"I love the school," said Catala, whose son is graduating this year. "It's the best thing that ever happened to us."

[\(Back to top\)](#)

STATE NEWS

Tenn. charter schools bill headed to governor

Associated Press

By: Staff

May 21, 2011

<http://www.ctpost.com/news/article/Tenn-charter-schools-bill-headed-to-governor-1389500.php>

Page 1 of 1

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — A proposal by Republican Gov. [Bill Haslam](#) to remove the cap on charter schools is headed to his desk.

The measure by Republican Sen. [Jamie Woodson](#) of Knoxville passed the Senate 22-9 Friday night after the House version was approved 72-18.

Charter schools are funded with state and local tax dollars but don't have to meet some of the state regulations that traditional public schools do as they try to find different ways to improve student learning.

Under current law, the number of charter schools is capped at 90 statewide. There are currently 40 in all: 25 in Memphis, 10 in Nashville, three in Hamilton County and one each in Knoxville and Shelby County.

Besides removing the cap, the legislation also allows any student in the charter school's jurisdiction to attend.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

Nevada teacher tenure bills advance to Senate amid disagreements about union roles

Associated Press

By: Michelle Rindels

May 20, 2011

<http://www.therepublic.com/view/story/c1d88214300d45e0b11e210507cd0512/NV--Teacher-Tenure/>

CARSON CITY, Nev. — A Senate committee passed two Democrat-supported bills making it easier to fire underperforming teachers and administrators, despite Republican objections that the bill concedes too much to unions.

Members of the Senate Education Committee on Friday voted unanimously to advance measures to extend a mandatory probationary period for new teachers to three years and send teachers back to probation if they receive unsatisfactory evaluations two consecutive years.

"We have some amazing things we're doing to reform education," said committee chairman Sen. Mo Denis, D-Las Vegas, acknowledging disagreements on the role of collective bargaining. "In the big picture, we're going to help kids."

The bills — spearheaded by Assembly Speaker John Ocegüera, D-Las Vegas, and Assembly Speaker Pro Tempore Debbie Smith, D-Sparks — already passed the Assembly and head for a vote in the full Senate. They likely face more amendments after that vote to resolve lingering questions about the process of firing teachers and the role of seniority in layoffs.

The measures are part of a package of Democratic education bills based on recommendations from the Education Reform Blue Ribbon Task Force, which prepared Nevada's application for federal Race to the Top dollars. Democrats have pointed to the bills as some of their capstone reforms.

But Republicans — who have repeatedly vowed they want to see reforms before they negotiate a tax increase — question whether the amended bills are strong enough to qualify as reforms.

"Let's not mistake bills for reform bills," said Sen. Greg Brower, R-Reno, who declined to classify the current versions of the measures — AB225 and AB229 — as reform bills or regular bills.

"It's a small step forward," Brower said. "There's lots of discussion and debate to do."

AB229 establishes a four-level evaluation system for teachers and administrators that rates teachers on a scale of "highly effective" to "ineffective." Teachers who receive an "ineffective" or "minimally effective" rating for two consecutive years return to probationary status, in which they are on a year-to-year contract.

New teachers are automatically on probationary status and can have their contracts discontinued at the end of the year.

The Nevada State Education Association union is pushing for more protections for teachers who are sent back to probationary status, although representatives from the school districts testified that lengthy due process hearings would dilute the impact of the reform.

Gov. Brian Sandoval offered amendments, and the committee included his recommendation that teacher evaluations be based at least 50 percent on data about student achievement.

But the committee could not agree on language addressing "last in, first out" or "LIFO" — the policy of using seniority as the sole consideration when a district goes through layoffs. Two motions to add more categories of consideration to the layoff process failed the Democrat-controlled committee.

The committee also voted on party lines, with Democrats in favor, to keep language that allows collective bargaining agreements to supersede some bill provisions.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

Bill to create charter schools in Maine advances

Associated Press

By: Staff

May 21, 2011

http://www.boston.com/news/education/k_12/articles/2011/05/21/bill_to_create_charter_schools_in_maine_advances/

AUGUSTA, Maine—A legislative committee has voted to advance a measure that would allow Maine to become the 41st state to allow public charter schools.

The Education and Cultural Affairs Committee voted 9-4 Friday.

Public charter schools are voluntary public schools that can neither teach religious practices nor discriminate against students or teachers. They must adhere to state and federal academic requirements.

Gov. Paul LePage campaigned in favor of charter schools.

The bill will be taken up by the full Legislature in the coming weeks.

[\(Back to top\)](#)