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NATIONAL NEWS

Shift Away from 'Seat Time' on Display in States

Education Week

By: Sean Cavanagh

February 3, 2012

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/state_edwatch/2012/02/shift_to_virtual_ed_away_from_seat_time_on_display_in_states.html

Thirty-six states have established policies that give districts and schools some degree of ability to award credits to students based on mastery of a subject, rather than "seat time," a [new report](#) says.

At the same time, the issue brief, released by the [National Governors Association](#), reveals the diversity of approaches taken by state lawmakers as they try to create more flexibility for students through virtual and other alternative options to traditional classroom instruction.

Some states require high schools to allow students to earn credits based on mastery—which could include showing portfolios of work, projects, or the completion of a tests.

Other states allow students to receive individual waivers from seat-time requirements on a case-by-case basis.

New Hampshire has taken what is probably the farthest-reaching steps away from seat time. The state requires all public high schools to base credit attainment on student mastery, rather than seat time, NGA explains. That means students can earn credits through expanded-learning opportunities, community service, and other means, including online options.

Why are states trying to create this flexibility? In some cases, they're interested in helping students who've fallen behind, or who don't do well in traditional academic settings, catch up on credit through online courses or other means. Sometimes they want to offer greater flexibility to students who want to move more quickly. Or they want to help students who are otherwise prevented from taking a course they want by their schedules, or limits on what their schools offer.

The report also notes that there are state policies that prevent moving away from seat-time requirements. States typically use student "enrollment counts," based on the number of students in a classroom for the whole school day. That means students taking part in virtual courses or other classes outside of the classroom may not count, resulting in schools receiving less per-pupil funding.

NGA argues that states and college systems can also do more to ensure that higher education institutions accept student transcripts with credits demonstrated by mastery.

Critics of virtual education—and [there are many](#)—have said that it is growing too quickly, with few safeguards to ensure quality. But judging from the wave of state activity, governors and lawmakers are keen on providing students and schools with more flexibility in how they acquire knowledge—and how they pick up academic credit.

STATE NEWS

Ohio: Opinion: High-quality customizable learning options should be the rule, not the exception

Ohio Gadfly Daily

By: Terry Ryan and Lisa Duty

February 1, 2012

<http://www.edexcellence.net/commentary/education-gadfly-daily/ohio-gadfly-daily/2012/high-quality-customizable-learning-options-should-be-the-rule-not-the-exception.html>

One could argue that 2011 was the year of “digital learning” in Ohio and across the nation. In September, the White House announced its “Digital Promise” campaign, while a number of states have been embracing initiatives and campaigns in this realm, aided and encouraged by national groups like the Digital Learning Council and the Foundation for Excellence in Education. Ohio’s biennial budget launched the Ohio Digital Learning Task Force and charged it with ensuring that the state’s “legislative environment is conducive to and supportive of the educators and digital innovators at the heart of this transformation.”

Our two organizations – KnowledgeWorks and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute – are committed to seeing Ohio become a leader in the implementation of digital learning opportunities for the state’s 1.8 million students. Ohio now stands at an important crossroads and 2012 could be a pivotal year on whether we move forward in the digital learning environment.

Our state has been a path-breaker when it comes to availability of full-time e-school options that leverage technology in learning. In fact, if all 33,000 children currently enrolled in Ohio e-schools were in one school district they would comprise the state’s third-largest district, just behind Columbus and Cleveland. Despite such numbers, Ohio has yet to harness fully the potential of digital learning for all students. And, given that digital learning can yield improvements in student achievement and offer solutions for more efficient spending, Ohio can’t afford to wait.

In *2011 Keeping Pace*, a national review of policy and practices in digital learning, Ohio received the highest rating possible for its availability of full-time online learning opportunities for students due to the state’s 27 virtual charter/community schools. Ohio e-school enrollment of 33,000 students is up 15 percent since 2008. But digital learning can and should take many different forms—from the full-time online options of e-schools to individual students seeking supplemental coursework to meet needs not met by their brick and mortar schools.

New blended learning options like Rocketship in California have shown significant academic gains for traditionally under-served students, while Carpe Diem in Arizona improve the student experience because they allow for customization and personalization of learning in a way that is both “high-tech” (through the seamless integration of appropriate technologies with teaching practices) and “high-touch” (through meaningful and relevant learning experiences with in-person teachers to complement online instruction).

There are districts, schools and teachers in Ohio that are starting to show the way as well. The Dayton Regional STEM school, for example, teaches its students Mandarin Chinese through an online course, while the Clermont County Educational Service Center has partnered with area districts to create a Virtual Talented and Gifted program at a time when traditional gifted programs are being scaled back or otherwise eliminated. But, to maximize digital learning opportunities for all its children Ohio has to develop systems for learning that are radically different to what was crafted long ago for a place-bound, 180-day school year in which children sat in rows of desks from morning to early afternoon.

To move Ohio from its industrial model of education to one better suited for education in the digital age we propose the following policies for 2012.

Remove barriers to digital learning

- Remove teacher-student ratios and class size limits created for a traditional classroom.
- Establish competency-based learning models that allow students to advance upon demonstrating mastery of knowledge or skills, not seat time.
- Educate students and parents about their right to choose high-quality online courses and make available credible information about which digital courses or programs work best under what conditions as well as the costs of those courses or programs.

Encourage innovation

- Provide all students in all grades access to a robust offering of high-quality courses from multiple high-quality providers in a competitive, data-driven marketplace.

- Define in law blended (bricks-and-mortar combined with online instruction) schools so as to encourage new designs, generate pilots, and attract proven models while ensuring their funding.
- Guarantee that funding follows the child to the individual course provider of his/her choice, evaluate providers based on student performance, and pay them in installments that incentivize completion and achievement.
- Unbundle, define and enable new educator roles and challenge universities, the private sector and others to prepare adults to serve in new capacities.

Promote equity

- Weight the funds for low-income and/or hard to serve students so as to control for the unintended consequences of digital providers selectively serving only students who are likely to demonstrate competency.
- Power up all regions of Ohio by aggregating purchase request data and leveraging bulk discount pricing to support connectivity and device acquisition for all.

Create accountability for a new era of learning

- End the archaic practice of funding seat-time, and fund course providers based on student performance instead of attendance.
- Require student performance and student and family satisfaction data are published as indicators of quality of course providers.

High-quality customizable learning options should be the rule rather than the exception. To more fully realize this goal in 2012 and beyond, Ohio lawmakers and policy makers need to embrace policies in education that encourage and support schools to innovate with digital learning technologies and opportunities, while ensuring all innovations are held accountable for performance and funded fairly and equitably.

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Tennessee: Grading our Teachers: Value-added formula raises alarm for some

The Commercial Appeal

By: Sarah Garland

February 6, 2012

<http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/2012/feb/06/grading-our-teachers-value-added-formula-raises/>

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This story, the second in a three-part series examining the new teacher evaluation systems being used in Memphis and Shelby County, is a collaboration between The Commercial Appeal and The Hechinger Report. Hechinger is a nonprofit, nonpartisan education news service based at Teachers College, Columbia University.

To close the achievement gap between poor and affluent students in Tennessee, some students may need to learn at double the rate of their high-performing peers, according to Tennessee Department of Education materials.

But this goal could create a potential Catch-22 for teachers, who for the first time this year will be measured on whether their students make large gains on standardized tests, as determined by the controversial statistical formula known among researchers as "value-added modeling."

"There's something suspicious about that formula," said Keith Williams, president of the Memphis Education Association, the local teachers union. "You're using something that has some real flaws."

In Tennessee, 45 percent of teachers teach in subjects with standardized tests, and for more than a decade, Tennessee has rated these teachers using their students' progress on the tests. School officials use complex statistics to predict how individual students will perform, based on their past scores. Teachers whose students achieve higher than predicted scores are deemed highly effective. Teachers whose students don't hit their predicted marks are seen as less so.

Until now, the state did nothing more than report the data to districts. This year, however, student test-score growth will count for 35 percent of a teacher's year-end evaluation. Districts will use the data to decide which teachers deserve tenure and which should be fired. (Another 15 percent of a teacher's score is made up of achievement measures chosen by the district, and 50 percent is based on classroom observations and other measures.)

The 55 percent of teachers who don't teach in subjects with standardized tests will be rated based on the test-score ratings of

other teachers in their schools.

Under the Tennessee 5-point rating system, teachers defined as a 3, or "at expectations," are those whose students make at least a year's worth of growth on state tests. To receive an "above expectations" score of 4 or 5, which new teachers must do for two years to get tenure, a teacher's students must demonstrate more than a year of growth.

Whether to use test-score data in teacher hiring and firing decisions has fueled heated debates nationwide. Until recently, most teachers were evaluated based only on infrequent classroom observations by principals. Now, more than two dozen states are looking to student test-scores to supplement observations, spurred on by the Obama administration's Race to the Top federal grant competition in which Tennessee was a first-round winner.

"Relative to what exists today, 'value-added' does a much better job of predicting how a teacher is going to be in the future," said Dan Goldhaber, director of the Center for Education Data & Research at the University of Washington. But, he added, "some people don't think that test-scores are the right way to judge the output of students."

The statistical formulas are highly complex -- the one used in Tennessee is especially complicated -- and, critics say, therefore not transparent. Research has suggested that the calculations are best used for identifying the very best and very worst teachers, but less reliable when it comes to rating teachers in the middle.

Educators and researchers have also debated whether the models should account for poverty and other factors that can make a difference in how students perform. And teachers and advocates like Williams worry about "a ceiling effect," in which teachers with high-achieving students receive low ratings because their students have less room for improvement.

"Research has shown practically no relationship between the entering academic achievement level for a class of students and a teacher's subsequent value-added estimate," Kelli Gauthier, a spokeswoman for the Tennessee Department of Education, said.

William Sanders, a former University of Tennessee researcher who now works for SAS, a private business-intelligence company, developed Tennessee's formula. SAS now administers the state's teacher ratings based on standardized tests, and its formula is considered private intellectual property.

Sanders has countered critics calling for more transparency by arguing that his formula's complexity makes it more accurate than simpler versions. The "layered model," as it is called by researchers, collects between three and five years of test-score data for each student in as many subjects as possible, including reading, math, science and social studies, in order to make predictions about how a student will score on a given test.

It also looks into the "future," says Sanders, recording how students do as they progress on to the next grade and giving credit to their previous teachers for how they perform.

The equations don't factor in individual student characteristics, like poverty or special-education status, in contrast to formulas in Florida and Washington, D.C. By comparing individual students to themselves over long periods of time, Sanders argues, statistical errors are reduced.

For some Memphis teachers, the biggest concern with the new system is the fact that the majority of teachers don't teach in subjects with standardized tests.

"That's the piece I don't like," said Detra Humble, a science teacher at Manassas High School. "My level of performance is on the backs of other teachers."

School administrators argue that shared scores will lead to more collaboration among teachers, however.

"The big lift is on" teachers of tested subjects, said Kriner Cash, superintendent of the Memphis City Schools. "What I say is it should not only be on them. It should be on everybody."

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Michigan: Experts, lawmakers weigh in on school choice debate

MLive.com

By: Blake Thorne

February 5, 2012

http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2012/02/experts_lawmakers_weigh_in_on.html

GENESEE COUNTY, Michigan — Even opponents of the legislation lifting the 150-school cap on university-sponsored charters say there are bright spots on the charter school landscape.

"My philosophy is, I just want good public schools for kids, and I don't care who's providing it," said Rep. Jim Ananich, D-Flint, a former Flint School District teacher.

Ananich voted against lifting the cap. Not because he's dead-set against charters, but because he wanted to see some quality standards built into the legislation before he could support it, he said.

Sen. David Robertson, R-Grand Blanc Twp., cited some charters long waiting lists as proof the schools are providing a quality alternative.

Robertson supported lifting the cap and has even introduced legislation that could mean even more charters. Dubbed a "parent-trigger law" in other states where it has passed, Robertson's bill would allow a poor-performing public school to be converted into a charter school if a majority of its parents or teachers signs a petition.

"I believe in empowering parents," Robertson said.

But some say parents don't even have the right tools to decide whether to entrust their child with a charter operator, let alone a whole school.

"We'd like (parents) to know how those schools are doing in student achievement," said Amber Arellano, executive director of Education Trust-Midwest, a Royal Oak-based organization that works to eliminate the achievement gap for poor and minority students.

Unfortunately, many don't look beyond the charter school's brochure for information on student performance, said Genesee Intermediate School District spokesman Jerry Johnson.

"I think the marketing of charter schools has been successful," Johnson said. "People believe charter schools are better. I don't think the data bears that out."

For others, it's about losing faith in the traditional system, Johnson added.

"In some cases, the move to a charter school has more to do with the perception of what the students are leaving as opposed to what students are going to," Johnson said.

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Florida: 'Parent Trigger' bill stirs praise, fear over what it means for Florida public schools

Tampa Bay Times

By: Jeffery S. Solochek

February 6, 2012

<http://www.tampabay.com/news/education/k12/parent-trigger-bill-stirs-praise-fear-over-what-it-means-for-florida/1214144>

Karen Francis-Winston joined the advisory committee at her child's school, intent on improving academics and discipline.

Things did get better at the Ocala middle school, but she always wished she had more leverage. Francis-Winston specifically wants a "parent-trigger" law that would force public school administrators to heed the wishes of moms and dads.

"Right now, there's not that fear," she said. "The fact that they know I could be pushing the parent trigger would make them move faster than they would have."

She may get her wish this year.

The "Parent Empowerment Act" — legislation with its roots in California — is gaining traction in the Florida Legislature, despite concerns that it might open the door to privately run charter schools taking over traditional ones.

Opponents argue the bill, which has the backing of big business and former Gov. Jeb Bush, is really a way for charter school companies to persuade unsuspecting parents to turn on their public school.

"It's just a method for uninformed, inactive parents to be used to shut schools down," said Rita Solnet, a Palm Beach parent and cofounder of Parents Across America, which advocates against school privatization.

"This is very bad for our community."

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Here's how the parent trigger bill would work:

- If at least half of the parents at a low-performing school sign a petition, they could impose a plan to turn around the school with measures that could include replacing much of the staff, converting the school to charter status or even closing it.
- Parents would be guaranteed that their children would not have teachers rated "unsatisfactory" or "needs improvement" in two consecutive years.

The concept has lately lost steam nationally, after having been proposed in several states. So supporters are looking to Florida

to revive interest. The bill has passed one committee in the Senate and two in the House, most recently on Friday.

Lining up against the bill are groups such as the Florida PTA, Orlando-based Fund Education Now, Support Dade Schools, Save Duval Schools and Jacksonville-based 50th No More.

"They try to sell it as a piece of grass roots legislation," said Colleen Wood of Save Duval Schools. "It's more Astroturf."

Solnet noted that when lawmakers rolled out the bill in late January, parents were invoked, but they weren't there.

Instead, speakers included representatives of the Florida Chamber of Commerce, Associated Industries of Florida and Jeb Bush's Foundation for Florida's Future, all firm supporters of vouchers and charters.

Rep. Michael Bileca, a Republican from Miami, insists that his bill would give parents a "more meaningful voice" in school reform. Opponents, citing the measure's supporters and history, say they don't buy that.

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In California, the first state to adopt a parent trigger law, the initiative was pushed by Parent Revolution, a group started by a charter firm with backing from conservative foundations. It has been invoked in only two schools, with no final resolution so far.

Just two other states — Texas and Mississippi — have adopted parent trigger laws. In Indiana, the idea nearly passed until some lawmakers tried to tie it to vouchers and ending teacher tenure.

Linda Serrato, a Parent Revolution organizer, said critics miss the point in arguing that the aim is to enrich private firms.

"It's really about what the parents want," she said.

Quite often, Serrato observed, parents don't want drastic change, just for administrators to seriously consider their input. Using the law, they can band together to push for reforms.

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Wendy Howard, a Pasco County mom who heads the Florida chapter of the National Coalition for Public School Options, sees the bill as a way to guarantee parents a seat at the table.

"Everyone agrees that parents should be as involved as possible in their child's education," Howard said. "This bill outlines specific ways that parents can not only be involved, it empowers them with information and tools to make a difference."

She recently convened state leaders in online, charter and other forms of school choice to talk up the legislation. StudentsFirst, a national organization run by Gov. Rick Scott adviser Michelle Rhee, also is organizing Florida parents behind the bill.

"Why would anyone resist giving parents information about their child's education, or giving them the power to say 'Enough is enough?'" asked StudentsFirst vice president Tim Melton.

Fran Connerney, whose son is a Hillsborough County second-grader, said he likes the idea of notifying parents "if their teacher is not up to par."

"If you know going in this teacher has had two bad reports ... you might want to think about moving" your kids out, he said.

He is not keen on the petition provision, though.

"School board members are elected for a reason," he said.

Sen. Bill Montford, a Democrat who also heads the state's superintendents association, asked sponsors to work with him on a compromise.

"It doesn't take a genius to figure out the more parental involvement you have, the better for children," he said in a committee meeting, where he voted for the bill.

Still, he said, "there is potential for misuse of this. None of us can allow that to happen."

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New Mexico: Opinion: Retention No Solution for Education

Albuquerque Journal

By: Rep. Rick Miera

February 4, 2012

<http://www.abqjournal.com/main/2012/02/04/opinion/retention-no-solution-for-education.html>

"You cannot uneducate the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. You cannot

oppress the people who are not afraid anymore. We have seen the future, and the future is ours."

- César Chávez

New Mexico's education system must be reformed, that much is clear. If our state is to be better and stronger in this new century than it was in the last, such a transformation must begin by giving our children the world-class education they deserve.

I am sponsoring legislation this session that will help our children achieve their potential, not by calling them failures and holding them back against the wishes of their parents and against the advice of their educators, but through a comprehensive plan of targeted intervention and effective remediation. My bill, HB 53, addresses the learning needs of New Mexico students in a proactive manner through the implementation of three common-sense measures.

First, research consistently and unequivocally shows that holding children back (retention) is detrimental to their long-term education and results in higher overall dropout rates. This same research shows that what works is intensive intervention during the early years of a child's education. That is why my bill will not allow schools to wait until third grade – when children may have already been struggling for years – to intervene. My bill will focus resources on individual students, from kindergarten onward, and target remediation to the specific areas in which a specific student needs help.

Second, my bill will let parents continue to have a strong voice in their child's education. Parents are the most important and effective influence on a child's education. That is why, under my plan, parents are active participants throughout the intervention process and children will never be required to repeat a grade without their parent's consent. Student assistant teams (which include the parents) will be formed for struggling students and a strategy will then be developed that specifies the child's deficiency and includes a targeted intervention/remediation program.

Third, HB 53 places equal emphasis on reading and math. Literacy means, first and foremost, the ability to understand and correctly manipulate symbols. Focusing exclusively on reading skills, especially in an age when math and science are the cornerstones of productivity and innovation, is extremely shortsighted. It is essential that we make sure our students are receiving a comprehensive, 21st-century education that targets their specific strengths and weaknesses from an early age.

My plan is a forward-looking approach to education policy that will create a comprehensive system of effective reforms. Most important, though, HB 53 will institute reforms that are good for our children.

Retention is not reform. Retention is not the answer. Forcing children, against the wishes of their parents, to repeat grades is a disappointing and ineffective approach that will only harm our children and our future.

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