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NATIONAL NEWS

Digital Learning Now: Online Education's Impact Player

Liberating Learning

By: Staff

May 4, 2011

<http://www.liberatinglearning.org/spotlight.php>

In less than a year, Digital Learning Now has become an important catalyst in the virtual education policy arena.

The goal of [Digital Learning Now](#), found in August 2010 as the Digital Learning Council, is to provide a road map for lawmakers and policy shapers to follow when developing legislation and policies that encourage the growth of online learning.

The group's narrow focused has worked. It's impact can be seen in statehouses, where [legislators quote](#) Digital Learning Now's "[10 Elements of High Quality Digital Learning](#)" and incorporate many of the elements into legislation.

Public policy analysts have used DLN's elements as the core to build [reports and studies](#) on virtual education. Laws expanding online learning opportunities approved this year in [Utah](#) and [Idaho](#) include parts of DLN's elements. What's more, when it looked as if these laws were likely not to get out of the legislative bodies, DLN leaders and supporters launched successful [efforts](#) to get the bills approved on the governors' desks for signing.

And if imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, Florida legislators wisely changed the name of a floundering bill from CS/CS/HB 7197 to the "[Digital Learning Now Act](#)." The name change, some say helped change the bill's fortunes because it got the needed votes for passage in the Florida House of Representatives.

Simply put, DLN's "10 Elements of High Quality Digital Learning" has become the equivalent of the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval when it comes to legislation aimed at expanding K-12 online education opportunities.

Why has Digital Learning Now been so effective so quickly?

- The face, really [the faces, of the organization](#) are two former governors that, when their names are linked, say bipartisan. Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, a Republican, and former West Virginia Gov. Bob Wise, a Democrat, immediately get door open when they talk to the current crop of governors and state lawmakers. In addition, [the 100 original signatories](#) of the Digital Learning Council policy proclamation represent a broad spectrum of influential leaders in politics, education and business.
- The narrow focus on education reform policy at the state level. The guiding principles make no bones about it, DLN's 10 elements "are directed toward state laws and policies." They are written in a way the make it easy for legislators and their staff to blend DLN's elements into a legislative mold.
- The harmonic convergence of public acceptance of tech advancement, an economic downturn that left states looking for

new funding solutions and good, old-fashion political influence (often provided by Bush and Wise.) DLN says it best, "Growing budget deficits and shrinking tax revenue present a tremendous challenge for the nation's governors and lawmakers ... However, what might appear to be an obstacle to reform can also present a great opportunity for innovation."

Bush, Wise and their DLN support team have spent their first year holding [forums](#), getting [op-eds](#) published, backing [online petitions](#), getting legislation written, approved and signed into law and, when necessary, using political muscle, to reach their goals.

To be sure, everyone is not enamored with DLN.

"There seems to be missing an appreciation for the value of the human and personal community which has always been a central crux of learning. Shouldn't there be recommendations that states and districts support on-line learners with opportunities and programs for athletics, for performing arts, for in-person mentoring, coaching, and counseling?" Jonathan Martin [wrote](#) in 2010 on the 21K12 blog.

"Don't we have to strive for a balance where we harness the best of the digital tools with the best of traditional practices, in which caring and inspirational adults can elicit the best efforts and warmly provide the best counsel?" he [asked](#).

Next up for DLN is a national report card. In October, the organization plans to participate in a [national summit](#) on education reform in San Francisco. One of the components of the meeting will be a report card that grades each state on how it is nurturing digital learning based on the 10 elements.

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Opinion: Scenes From the New York Education Wars

Wall Street Journal

By: Joel Klein

May 10, 2011

http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703730804576312880501768962.html?mod=WSJ_Opinion_LEADTop

When I was chancellor, I was told confrontation was bad. Not so.

Teachers are extremely effective messengers to parents, community groups, faith-based groups and elected officials—and their unions know how to deploy them well. Happy unions can give a politician massive clout, and unhappy unions—well, just ask Eva Moskowitz, a Democrat who headed the New York City Council Education Committee when I became schools chancellor in 2002.

Smart, savvy, ambitious, often a pain in my neck and atypically fearless for a politician, Ms. Moskowitz was widely expected to be elected Manhattan borough president in 2005. Until, that is, she held hearings on the city teachers-union contract, an extraordinary document, running for hundreds of pages, governing who can teach what and when, who can be assigned to hall-monitor or lunchroom duty and who can't, who has to be given time off to do union work during the school day, and so on.

The contract defied parody. So when Ms. Moskowitz exposed its ridiculousness, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), then headed by Randi Weingarten, made sure that Ms. Moskowitz's run for borough president came up short. After that, other elected officials would say to me, "I agree with you, but I ain't gonna get Eva'd."

Politicians—especially Democratic politicians—generally do what the unions want. The unions, in turn, are very clear about what that is: They want happy members, so that those who run the unions get re-elected, and they want more members, so their power, money and influence grow. The effect of all this? As Albert Shanker, the late, iconic head of the UFT, once pointedly said, "When schoolchildren start paying union dues, that's when I'll start representing the interests of schoolchildren."

Union power is why it's virtually impossible to fire a teacher for non-performance. In New York City, which has some 55,000 tenured teachers, we were able to fire only half a dozen or so for incompetence in a given year, even though we devoted significant resources to this effort.

The extent of the problem is difficult to overstate. Take "rubber rooms," where teachers were kept—while doing no work—pending resolution of disciplinary charges against them, mostly for malfeasance, like physical abuse or embezzlement, but also for incompetence. The teachers got paid regardless. Before we stopped this charade—by returning many of the teachers to the classroom, unfortunately—it cost the city about \$35 million a year. (Still costing more than \$100 million annually are the more than 1,000 teachers who get full pay to perform substitute or administrative duties because no principal wants to hire them full-time.)

Then there were the several teachers accused of sexual misconduct—at least one was found guilty—whom union-approved arbitrators refused to terminate. The city was required to put them back in the classroom, but we refused to do so. Of course, the union has never sued to have the teachers reinstated. It just makes sure these deadbeats stay on the payroll with full pay and a lifetime pension.

It's little surprise, then, that American kids don't get the education they deserve. When I demanded reform as chancellor, I was regularly told by friends and foes alike that impatience is immature, challenging the educational establishment is a losing strategy, collaboration is necessary, and controversy is bad. It was bad advice, typical of the status-quo thinking that dominates

American education.

Consider the common refrain that "We'll never fix education until we fix poverty." This lets school systems off the hook. Of course money, a stable family and strong values typically make it easier to educate a child. But we now know that, keeping those things constant, certain schools can get dramatically different outcomes with the same kids.

Take Texas and California. The two states have very similar demographics, yet Texas outperforms California on all four national tests—across demographic groups—despite spending less money per pupil. The gap amounts to about a year's worth of learning. That's big.

At individual schools, differences can be breathtaking. One charter in New York City, Harlem Success Academy 1 (founded by Ms. Moskowitz after she left politics), has students who are demographically almost identical to those in nearby schools, yet it gets entirely different results.

Eighty-eight percent of Harlem Success students are proficient in reading and 95% are proficient in math. Six nearby schools have an average of 31% and 39% proficiency in those subjects, respectively. More than 90% of Harlem Success fourth-graders scored at the highest level on New York State's most recent science tests, while only 43% of fourth-graders citywide did so. Harlem Success's black students outperformed white students at more than 700 schools across the state. Overall, the charter now performs at the same level as the gifted-and-talented schools in New York City, all of which have demanding admissions requirements. Harlem Success, by contrast, selects its students, mostly poor and minority, by random lottery.

Critics try to discredit these differences. Writing last year in the *New York Review of Books*, the historian Diane Ravitch argued that schools like Harlem Success aren't the answer because, as a group, charter schools don't outperform traditional public schools. Yet even Ms. Ravitch had to acknowledge that some charter schools get "amazing results." If that's the case, shouldn't we be asking why they get much better results—and focusing on how to replicate them?

A full-scale transition from a government-run monopoly to a competitive marketplace won't happen quickly, but that's no reason not to begin introducing more competition. In the lower grades, we should make sure that every student has at least one alternative—and preferably several—to her neighborhood school.

We pursued that goal in New York City by opening more than 100 charter schools in high-poverty communities. Almost 80,000 families chose these new schools—though we had space for only 40,000; the rest are on waiting lists. Traditional schools and the unions have been screaming bloody murder, which is a good sign: It means that the monopolists are beginning to feel the effects of competition. And at the middle-school and high-school levels, where students are more mobile, we can create community-based choice systems or even citywide ones. New York City high school students now have citywide choice (with some geographic priority), and schools know they have to compete for students.

Despite the tough politics involved, change is possible. In New York City, it took a mayor willing to assume control over the system and risk significant political capital. It also took time: Mayor Bloomberg and I had more than eight years together, while most urban superintendents serve for about three and a half.

Most of all, it required building political support. Toward the end of my tenure, reformers were fighting to lift the state-imposed cap on the number of charter schools allowed to open. The teachers unions opposed our effort precisely because our expansion of charter schools had been so successful. In fact, six months earlier, they had helped defeat a similar effort.

But this time, families with kids in charter schools and their community allies were prepared to help us fight. Philanthropic and business interests raised millions to support the mobilization effort, run ads and hire lobbyists. We prevailed, and the state legislature raised the cap substantially.

As Shanker put it in a surprisingly candid speech in 1993: "We are at the point that the auto industry was at a few years ago. They could see they were losing market share every year and still not believe that it really had anything to do with the quality of the product. . . . I think we will get—and deserve—the end of public education through some sort of privatization scheme if we don't behave differently. Unfortunately, very few people really believe that yet. They talk about it, and they don't like it, but they're not ready to change and stop doing the things that brought us to this point."

Mr. Klein, the CEO of News Corporation's educational division, was chancellor of New York City public schools from 2002 through 2010. [This article is adapted from the current issue of The Atlantic.](#)

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FLORIDA NEWS

Michelle Rhee's group praises new FL school laws (on merit pay, charters, vouchers, transfers)

Orlando Sentinel

By: Leslie Postal

May 9, 2011

http://blogs.orlandosentinel.com/news_education_edblog/2011/05/michelle-rhees-group-praises-new-fl-school-laws-on-merit-pay-charters-vouchers-transfers.html?

Michelle Rhee, who traveled to Tallahassee to testify in favor of a merit pay bill, today issued praise to the Florida Legislature for many of the school-related bills it passed in its just-wrapped up session.

Rhee, the former chancellor of D.C. schools, now runs StudentsFirst. She is also an education advisor to Gov. Rick Scott and a champion of many of the same reforms he and Republican lawmakers touted.

In her group's view, the new laws will help kids get "great" teachers and attend "great" schools. These laws include measures to expand charters, vouchers and transfers from one school to another, as well as the new, far-reaching teacher merit-pay legislation.

Of course, the Florida Education Association views the session as "disastrous," as do many local educators (if for no other reason than the steep budget cuts enacted).

But here is StudentsFirst's take:

"Florida students will have a much greater chance at having a great teacher and attending a great school. Last week, following the transformative Student Success Law, Florida passed additional bills which will give parents the information and choices they deserve to ensure their child gets a great education.

Next year, Florida will be putting students first by:

–Allowing the expansion and fair financing of high performing charter schools, creating more choices for the 37,000 students that were turned away last year.

– Providing parents with information about the effectiveness of their school through a school rating system and giving parents the right to move their children out of failing schools and into high performing schools, even if that means changing districts.

–Expanding the number of children with disabilities that will be able to attend private schools that can meet their needs, through the McKay Scholarship.

–Implementing a fair and robust teacher evaluation system and rewarding the best teachers with salary increases.

–Saving great teachers by ending seniority-based layoffs so that more students will have a great teacher.

–Giving principals the tools to only hire effective teachers.

Congratulations Florida! "

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Flagler's charter schools behind in FCAT

Dayton Beach News-Journal

By: Annie Martin

May 10, 2011

<http://www.news-journalonline.com/news/local/flagler/2011/05/10/flaglers-charter-schools-behind-in-fcat.html>

BUNNELL -- Students enrolled in Flagler County's three charter schools fared worse than their peers at more traditional public schools on the latest Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test writing test.

The charter schools, as well as other local schools and schools throughout the rest of the state, improved over last year's scores, which were released last week. But the results still show a gap between students in traditional public schools and the charter schools in Flagler County at the fourth- and eighth-grade levels.

Charter schools serve about 850 of the county's nearly 13,000 public school students.

The FCAT is the foundation of the state's school accountability system. The unofficial passing score for the writing test, which indicates whether a student is performing at or above grade level, was increased this year from 3.5 to 4 on a 6-point scale.

Three Volusia County charter schools -- Boston Avenue and Richard Milburn Academy East and West -- also lagged behind traditional public schools. Boston Avenue, a K-5 school in DeLand, is run by School Management Solutions, which also operates Heritage Academy in Bunnell.

In Flagler, the difference was especially apparent at the fourth-grade level. Less than 60 percent of the district's charter school fourth-graders earned four or more points on the test, compared with 85 percent of the district's fourth-graders and 81 percent of their peers statewide.

"What the data is definitely showing is that the traditional district schools are doing a little better than the charter schools in writing at this time," said Jim Devine, the district's testing coordinator.

The good news is two of the schools, Heritage Academy and Palm Harbor Academy, made significant gains over last year, Devine said. At Heritage, the percentage of fourth-graders that scored 4 or better jumped from 23 percent in 2010 to 60 percent

this year. The school's eighth- and 10th-graders also made gains.

"I was very pleased," Principal Nicole Richards said. "The students made great gains this year. We did focus a lot on writing, and the teachers worked together collaboratively."

Richards didn't comment on why Heritage's scores were lower than other local schools but said, "we do the same thing as the other schools."

The county's largest charter school, Imagine School at Town Center, dropped 5 percentage points at the fourth-grade level. Eighth-graders, the school's oldest students, held steady.

"Just looking at the overall average, I was a little disappointed," Principal Lisa O'Grady said. "However, when I looked at each individual student's scores I was extremely proud."

A fourth-grade teacher hired midway through the year has introduced a new writing program, she said. The school is strongly considering having students switch teachers for certain subjects, including writing, next year.

Palm Harbor Academy Principal Hortense Evans did not return a phone message.

School Board Member Colleen Conklin said the test results did not surprise her.

"We do have students that are returning (to the traditional schools) that are academically behind, and some of the FCAT scores are a concern," she said.

Conklin has asked district staff to research ways to ensure the county's charter schools are meeting the district's academic standards. The district needs to establish a system of "checks and balances," for the charter schools, she said.

"All of our charter school partners have been willing to work with us," Conklin said. "I think they want what's best for their students as well."

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STATE NEWS

Wisconsin Governor Walker touts school choice as economic growth tool

Associated Press

By: Staff

May 9, 2011

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/chi-ap-wi-schoolchoice-walk.0.6805628.story>

MINNEAPOLIS – States need educational options such as school choice to guarantee an educated workforce and a resulting economic boost, Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker said Monday night at a national meeting of school choice supporters.

"We know if we're going to have sustained economic growth we've got to have an educated workforce," Walker said in a keynote address at the National Policy Summit of the American Federation for Children in Washington, D.C., that was broadcast over the Internet.

But for that to happen, Walker said, there must be options when it comes to education.

The Republican governor is proposing expanding a Wisconsin school voucher program that currently is available only to low-income students in Milwaukee. He wants to expand the program to all of Milwaukee County and phase out the low-income qualifying ceiling.

Milwaukee's school choice program, which allows low-income students to attend private schools at taxpayers' expense, could grow under a Republican-backed proposal headed for a vote in the Wisconsin Assembly. Last week the budget-writing Joint Finance Committee passed the bill that eliminates the cap on students enrolled in the program. The cap is currently 22,500 students; this year about 20,300 students were enrolled.

Walker said his proposals also will help Milwaukee's public school system by putting more pressure on public schools to achieve.

Walker also touted the educational, welfare and economic reforms that began under a Republican predecessor, former Wisconsin Gov. Tommy Thompson.

"Governor Thompson talked about challenging the status quo in many ways," Walker said.

Educational opportunities are not only good for children, Walker said. "I think when you make a commitment to true education

reform it's also good for your state's economy," he said.

A company's employees want their children to live in a state that has educational opportunities, "which is really what economic opportunity is all about," Walker said.

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2 sides want a say in Nevada teacher firing bill

Associated Press

By: Staff

May 9, 2011

<http://www.lasvegassun.com/news/2011/may/09/nv-teacher-tenure-1st-ld-writethru/>

Union representatives are trying to soften two Democrat-sponsored bills making it easier to fire underperforming teachers, saying the bills don't do enough to protect employees from rash dismissals.

The proposed amendment from the Nevada State Education Association comes as several groups _ including the state's largest school districts and Gov. Brian Sandoval's staff _ are trying to shape the bills as a way to reform the state's low-ranking K-12 education system.

"This isn't for show. This isn't something we're just doing," said bill co-sponsor Speaker Pro Tempore Debbie Smith, D-Sparks, saying she wants the bills to enact substantial change.

The measures, AB225 and AB229, already passed the Assembly and must pass the Senate no later than May 20. No action was taken at a Monday hearing before the Senate Education Committee.

Nevada schools went through a hiring spree last decade to keep up with breakneck population growth. In Clark County, 25,000 new teachers were hired between the year 2000 and 2010, Smith said.

Bill co-sponsor Assembly Speaker John Ocegüera, D-Las Vegas, said while Nevada does not have "a plethora" of bad teachers and administrators, it is too difficult to fire underperforming employees.

Existing law classifies new hires as "probationary employees" _ with fewer rights to contract renewal _ for the first two years. Often, the second year of the probation period is waived and a teacher gets post-probationary status, sometimes called tenure. The proposed legislation extends the probationary period to three years.

Teachers and administrators would also be evaluated on a four-level scale ranging from "ineffective" to "highly effective," which is more nuanced than the existing, two-level evaluation. Post-probationary employees would become probationary employees again after their second consecutive year of an unsatisfactory rating.

NSEA said probationary employees could be fired in a day under the bill, and proposed a process for a hearing. The union also wants districts to provide "intensive assistance" for underperforming teachers before a district fires them.

But Senate Republicans balked at some of the bills' union-friendly elements, including one section that allows collective bargaining agreements to supersede the stricter tenure provisions.

"The deck is stacked in favor of collective bargaining," said Sen. Greg Brower, R-Reno.

Democratic Assembly leaders are sponsoring the bills, which are based on recommendations from the Education Reform Blue Ribbon Task Force that submitted Nevada's application for federal Race to the Top education funds.

Gov. Brian Sandoval has proposed a more aggressive version of the bill _ AB555, which proposes eliminating teacher tenure altogether and putting all employees on a year-to-year contract.

Members of the business community, including the Reno Sparks Chamber of Commerce, expressed support for AB555, while some teachers testified at an earlier hearing on the governor's bill that the year-to-year contract would not make them more effective, but more stressed.

"If this body decides on a compromise, that's OK," said Sandoval's senior adviser Dale Erquiaga. "It will be better than what we have now."

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Ohio Governor Kasich outlines his view on how to judge teachers

Columbus Dispatch

By: Joe Vardon

May 10, 2011

http://www.dispatch.com/live/content/local_news/stories/2011/05/10/kasich-outlines-his-view-on-how-to-judge-teachers.html?sid=101

When Gov. John Kasich wasn't blasting the nursing-home lobby yesterday or discussing a tax cut for Ohioans in 2012, he was offering insight into his views on how a teacher should be judged in the classroom.

Kasich, who spoke at a warehouse in Mason packed with elected officials and business leaders, said a teacher's performance should be based on the progress students make in the classroom.

He also said lower-level students should not be measured against higher-level students when judging a teacher's performance.

"It's all about the progress that gets made," Kasich said. "The simple fact of the matter is we want to measure the amount of content that a kid gets through a year."

Included in Senate Bill 5 and Kasich's budget are provisions to place teachers on a merit-based pay system. Recommendations for how a teacher's performance shall be judged are due in April, but Kasich said he would move to delay implementation of merit pay if he doesn't feel the metrics used to judge teachers are fair.

"Let me tell you some of my concerns," Kasich told the crowd yesterday. "If I'm a teacher at the school and I don't kiss up to the parents, am I going to get punished? If I don't kiss up to the principal, am I going to get punished for that? These are all legitimate concerns."

Kasich also said "if you shield the work of a public employee from assessment, you are welcoming mediocrity."

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Pennsylvania Governor links teachers' unions to failing schools

Associated Press

By: Marc Levy

May 9, 2011

http://www.forbes.com/feeds/ap/2011/05/09/business-us-corbett-schools-pennsylvania_8457858.html

HARRISBURG, Pa. - Pennsylvania's public schools have focused too much on teacher contracts and not enough on curriculum, Gov. Tom Corbett said Monday, telling supporters of public-school alternatives that competition with private, religious or charter schools will improve the quality of education and help society erase class divisions.

In the prepared text of the speech, Corbett linked teachers' unions to poorly performing schools and said giving students the ability to take taxpayer-provided tuition money to the school of their choice would open up a "mansion of opportunities" for kids who want to learn.

"There is no way to separate funding from the reform, not when competition is the agent of change," Corbett told the American Federation for Children's second annual national policy summit in Washington, D.C. "And after decades of watching our leaders try everything else, the only effective change-maker I can name is competition."

Children in bad public schools need an escape, and the poor will have that opportunity only when their schools have to compete for them, he said. He contrasted child-centered, values-oriented education at private and religious schools to a labor-management model at public schools.

Competition can help failing public schools find new ways to improve, he said.

Both chambers of the Pennsylvania Legislature are considering bills that would expand taxpayer support for children to attend private schools, though the approach by competing House and Senate bills are substantially different. Both are sponsored by Republicans.

Critics of school choice or school vouchers, including Democrats and labor unions, say badly needed money is diverted from the public schools that need it. If the state really wants to help all children in struggling schools, it should force those districts to extend school days, hold summer school and reduce class sizes, Sen. Vincent Hughes, D-Philadelphia, has said.

Corbett's speech also singled out teachers' unions.

Corbett said he is not blaming teachers for wanting a living salary or for wanting protection against capricious dismissal. But he also said that school districts began focusing too much on contracts, and too little on curriculum, in the years since teachers unionized.

He criticized systems that reward teachers for longevity and not for effectiveness.

"The only culture some of our schools perpetuate is that of an educational industry that ensures a guaranteed income for those who can hang on long enough for tenure," he said.

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