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NATIONAL NEWS

GOP Candidates Criticize NCLB in Debate

Alyson Klein

By: Education Week

August 12, 2011

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2011/08/so_after_the_last_republican.html

After the last Republican debate in June, White House press secretary Jay Carney noted that the GOP candidates didn't mention the word "education" or "middle class" even once. (Politifact [figured out](#) Carney was right, at least about the education part.)

Last night, the Republicans held a debate in Iowa, sponsored by Fox News and the Washington Examiner. Education came up five minutes from the end of the two-hour debate. Two candidates were asked if—as president—they would continue to enforce the No Child Left Behind Act.

The answer was an emphatic "no", at least from Jon Huntsman, a businessman and former governor of Utah, and Herman Cain, the former CEO of Godfather's Pizza. (Other candidates didn't get a crack at the question.)

"No Child Left Behind hasn't worked for this country," Huntsman said. He'd like to see more school choice and expanded use of technology in classrooms.

Cain said he believed that education is a local issue. "The federal government should get out of the business of trying to micromanage the education of our children," he said.

Interestingly, the Republican who arguably has the most to say about education, Gov. Rick Perry of Texas, wasn't even in the debate. Perry, whose spokesman announced shortly before the debate that the governor would indeed run for president, is the [anti-Obama](#) when it comes to K-12 policy.

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Charter Operators Face Challenges in 'Scaling Up'

Education Week

By: Mary Ann Zehr

August 12, 2011

http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/08/12/01charter_ep.h31.html?tkn=NRYP%2BN9bD0hvQK9pKfQwlsG5ajm%2BpksB7u1I&cmp=clp-edweek

The pace at which the highest-performing charter-management organizations are “scaling up” is being determined largely by how rapidly they can develop and hire strong leaders and acquire physical space, and by the level of support they receive for growth from city or state policies, say leaders from some charter organizations viewed by advocates as successful.

From the 1999-2000 to 2008-09 school years, the number of students enrolled in charter schools more than tripled, from 340,000 to 1.4 million, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. The proportion of all public schools that are charter schools more than doubled, from 2 percent to 5 percent, during that same period, but that growth has not been uniform across the country.

To explore what might be obstacles to growth for successful charter operators, *Education Week* interviewed leaders of five of the seven charter-management organizations, or CMOs, in the NewSchools Venture Fund’s portfolio that the fund sees as producing the best student-achievement results.

Those seven charter operators are: [Aspire Public Schools](#), [Achievement First](#), [Green Dot Public Schools](#), [Harlem Success Academy Charter School](#), the [Knowledge Is Power Program](#), [Uncommon Schools](#), and [Rocketship Education](#). That same set of operators has also been identified by the Center on Reinventing Public Education, at the University of Washington, in Seattle, as the nation’s top performers, and the center is expected to release a report in the fall about the characteristics that have made them successful.

As might be expected, some of the charter operators identified by charter supporters to have the strongest records in student achievement are focusing their expansion in cities or states that have policies viewed as friendly to charter schools, such as New York City and Newark, N.J., and are steering away from locations viewed as unfriendly. Legislation passed in the last year that relaxed limitations or lifted caps on opening charter schools in Illinois, Indiana, North Carolina, and Tennessee will benefit charter operators that want to expand, said Chad A. Miller, the senior director of federal advocacy for the Washington-based National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

Policies that make it easy for charter schools to acquire free or low-cost facilities or that ensure such schools get the same per-pupil funding as regular public schools are a big draw. The presence of Teach For America, an alternative teacher-preparation program, is also attractive to charter operators.

Charter schools are publicly financed but largely independent of the regular school system. Some are single-site schools run by small, local groups; others are part of growing regional or national networks operated by CMOs.

Charter Territory

Charter-management organizations that were operating at least two schools in 2007 were concentrated in 18 states and the District of Columbia. CMO leaders say they are scaling up in several states where they view policies to be charter-friendly.

Not everyone thinks that policies that make it easier for charter operators are fair.

On July 25, a group of public school parents, backed by advocacy groups, filed [a lawsuit](#) in a New York trial court arguing that charter schools should be required to pay for the use of public school buildings.

Leonie Haimson, the executive director of Class Size Matters, a New York City-based nonprofit organization that is backing the lawsuit, contends that the city’s education department is breaking state law by not providing space and services to charter schools at cost.

“Their expansion is undermining the quality and resources of our regular public schools,” she said, “Meanwhile, our public school students are experiencing larger class sizes, are losing access to art, music, and science rooms, are losing their libraries, and increasingly, special-needs students are getting their services in hallways, closets, and stairwells.”

Also, on Aug. 2, North Carolina’s court of appeals stood by a lower court’s decision that charter schools aren’t entitled to the capital funds that traditional public schools receive in response to a lawsuit filed in 2009 by seven charter schools seeking access to such funds. The [appeals court ruling](#)  said the matter should be determined by legislative action rather than judicial decision.

But a New York state judge had a different perspective in ruling last month on a separate lawsuit that the United Federation of Teachers, the NAACP, and other groups, had filed in June. That suit contested the closing of some 22 public schools and the planned “co-location” of 16 new charter schools into buildings that are now the home for traditional public schools. The judge sided against the plaintiffs by dismissing a preliminary injunction to block the New York City district’s plan.

“It’s a bit ironic that going back two decades ago, the earliest advocates for charters claimed that the education sector had been taken over by special-interest groups, like the unions,” reflected Bruce Fuller, a professor of education and public policy at the University of California, Berkeley, who studies charter schools. “Fast forward 20 years later, and it’s the charter lobby that has captured the hearts and minds of politicians and the charter lobby that’s pushing for favorable treatment.”

Hospitable Environments

Boston and Milwaukee have recently moved from the “unfriendly” list to the “friendly” list in terms of being hospitable to charter

operators, while California, because of its persistent budget crisis, is seen by charter operators as offering an increasingly challenging environment for expansion. One CMO that opened its first schools in Connecticut has ruled out opening new schools in the Constitution State in favor of opening new schools in nearby New York City.

“The bottom line for charter-management organizations is, wherever they operate, they want to get the same per-pupil funding as traditional school districts,” said Deborah McGriff, a nonprofit partner for the NewSchools Venture Fund, in San Francisco, which finances the replication of charter schools by CMOs it deems high-performing.

The expansion of high-quality charter schools isn't only of interest to private funders, such as the NewSchools Venture Fund. The U.S. Department of Education operates a grant program with the same mission; [the program gave out](#) \$50 million in fiscal 2010, its first year, and is expected to provide \$25 million for that purpose in fiscal 2011. The department released [final priorities](#) for the program July 12.

The \$50 million last year was given to a dozen charter operators that said they would open 127 new schools and expand 31 others.

The federal competition has maintained its requirement from its first year that grants will be given only to charter operators that have experience running more than one high-quality charter school. The Education Department tweaked the priorities for the competition for fiscal 2011, which ends Sept. 30, and later years to spell out for the first time that it will give preference to charter operators that demonstrate a record of enrolling a diverse group of students, including students with disabilities and English-language learners.

The upcoming report from the [Center on Reinventing Public Education](#) includes findings that charter-management organizations are opening schools in only a small number of states. Robin Lake, the associate director of the center, said that “a big part of that is whether states have hospitable policies.”

Currently, the average nationwide per-pupil funding rate for charter schools is about 80 percent of the rate for regular public schools, according to Ms. McGriff, who was the general superintendent of Detroit Public Schools from 1991-1993. She cited the identification of high-quality teachers and principals as the biggest factor setting the pace for growth of high-performing charter operators, with the ability of charter operators to pay for school buildings as a close runner-up.

Even though Rocketship Education, based in Palo Alto, Calif., runs only three schools, the strong student outcomes for those schools, which serve only K-5 students, and the program's promise to yield financially sustainable schools have attracted recruiters from halfway across the country.

Rocketship's Expansion

Aylon Samouha, the chief schools officer for Rocketship Education, said a team of politicians and educators from Milwaukee, including the city's mayor, a charter authorizer, and a representative from Teach For America, visited Rocketship's schools in San Jose, Calif., to try to recruit Rocketship to Milwaukee.

Mr. Samouha said Rocketship Education is considering opening schools in that city, as well as in Chicago, New Orleans, and Newark. It has applied for charters in California's Santa Clara County and in the cities of East Palo Alto, Oakland, and San Francisco.

It will cost \$2.5 million to \$3 million for the charter operator to open a cluster of eight schools in a particular location over five years, and after that the schools will be financially sustainable, according to Mr. Samouha.

The charter operator saves money on teachers' salaries by having students spend only four hours a day in classrooms, where the teachers are expected to work with them on higher-order skills, and two hours a day in a learning lab, where they work on their basic skills with the help of computer software and small-group learning with teachers.

The Rocketship CMO won't open schools in any location unless Teach For America has a presence there, Mr. Samouha said. Seventy-five percent of the charter operator's teachers are members or alumni of TFA, a program that trains recent graduates of top colleges for stints as teachers in high-need schools.

“We've got to go where we can get the most quality in one swoop, and that happens to be Teach For America, both for teachers and future school leaders,” Mr. Samouha said. He defined quality, in part, as “people excited about education reform.”

Rocketship Education plans to open two more schools this coming school year and aims to be running some 200 schools across the country by 2020. Developing strong teachers and leaders and acquiring physical space are challenges to Rocketship's growth, Mr. Samouha said. Equally challenging is getting charter authorizers to agree to a charter to open eight schools over five years in one location, which is how Rocketship plans to proceed with growth, Mr. Samouha said.

Beyond California

The Los Angeles-based Green Dot Public Schools, which has already scaled up considerably since launching its first charter school in 2000, is also being recruited outside California.

“Governors have called me begging me to get Green Dot in their states,” said Marco Petruzzi, the president and chief executive officer of Green Dot. The organization’s first school served 140 9th graders. This coming school year, the CMO is set to operate 21 schools with 10,000 students in Los Angeles.

That level of enrollment marks a significant growth spurt, even over this past school year, when 8,300 students were enrolled in Green Dot schools. (Green Dot considers some of its campuses to have several schools on them.)

While Green Dot initially opened mostly independent charter schools, the organization now has a strong focus on “turnarounds” of low-achieving schools, setting it apart from the other charter leaders interviewed for this story. Most charter operators have deliberately steered away from trying to improve existing schools in favor of starting new ones.

Mr. Petruzzi said that developing and hiring principals and coping with what educators view as California’s low per-pupil student funding—set to be less than \$6,000 per pupil for charter schools this coming school year—are the top barriers Green Dot faces in scaling up. Also, he said, persuading the Los Angeles Unified School District to turn over schools and buildings to Green Dot is increasingly a challenge.

But Monica Carazo, a spokeswoman for the 672,000-student Los Angeles Unified School District, said the district complied with all four requests for buildings made by Green Dot schools for the 2011-12 school year.

Green Dot has plans to scale up to serving 15,000 or 16,000 students in Los Angeles by 2015, according to Mr. Petruzzi. Its involvement outside of Los Angeles so far extends only to a school in the Bronx borough of New York that it doesn’t officially operate.

Seeking Friendly Climates

Aspire, in Oakland, has also focused so far only on California. It opened its first charter school in Stockton, Calif., in the 1999-2000 school year and has grown by several schools each year. The CMO operates 30 schools and has nearly doubled its enrollment, to 12,000, over the past three school years.

James Willcox, the chief executive officer of Aspire, said the difficult budget climate in California is causing him and other Aspire leaders to think about opening schools outside the state.

“It’s getting harder and harder to do quality schools in California,” he said, “because the funding is so painfully low, and charter schools get less per student than traditional public schools.”

About 10 percent of the charter network’s \$100 million budget is provided by private philanthropy, he said.

Meanwhile, the charter operator Achievement First, which opened its first charter schools in Connecticut in 1999, has decided that its second home, New York City, has policies that are more welcoming for charter schools. The organization has decided to abandon further growth in Connecticut unless that state changes its policies, said Dacia Toll, one of the founders and the co-chief executive officer for the network.

New York is a draw because the city’s school system is providing charter operators with school buildings for free or at a low cost, she said.

Funding Differences

The per-pupil rate for charter schools in New York City is \$13,500, the same rate as for regular public schools. By contrast, Connecticut gives charter schools 75 percent of the per-pupil rate that it gives regular schools, Ms. Toll said, and the money comes from a separate stream of funding for charter schools that has been flat for four years.

Achievement First’s charter schools in New York City are financially sustainable after an investment of between \$500,000 and \$750,000 for startup costs, but that’s not the case in Connecticut, where the charter operator’s schools need the support of philanthropic funding to stay open, Ms. Toll said.

Achievement First opened its first school in Bridgeport 12 years ago and now has 10 charters (some that include several schools), which are expected to enroll 6,200 student in the 2011-12 school year.

But Eva Moskowitz, the head of Harlem Success Academy Charter School, indicated that opening charter schools in New York City is no picnic when she spoke at a session about scaling-up at the annual conference of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, held in Atlanta in June.

Her organization has been sued over facilities issues in the lawsuit filed in June by the United Federation of Teachers and civil rights groups.

“When I open new schools, they say I’m empire-building. I’m a chain,” she said of her critics. “I’m only at nine [schools].”

Ms. Toll said that Harlem Success is likely experiencing more difficulty than Achievement First to get physical space in New York because it seeks to use buildings in Harlem, where space is at more of a premium than it is in the Brooklyn neighborhoods where Achievement First has launched schools.

In comparison, the charter operator on the NewSchools Venture Fund's top-performing list that has grown in the most locations is the Knowledge Is Power Program, or KIPP. A KIPP school opened both in Houston and New York City in 1995, and since then, the network has grown to 109 schools in 20 states and the District of Columbia. KIPP leaders expect to expand the network from its current enrollment of 27,000 students to 55,000 by 2015, said Richard Barth, the CEO of the KIPP Foundation, in San Francisco.

"This is very hard work. There's no silver bullet," he said. "Human capital is the number-one challenge."

Mr. Barth said KIPP is focusing on growing the number of schools and students served in the charter-friendly locations where it is already present, rather than opening schools in new locations. That means significant scaling up in Atlanta, the District of Columbia, New Orleans, and Newark.

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Cost, Test Score Concerns Accompany Cyber Charter Schools

Education Week

By: David Mekeel

August 11, 2011

http://www.edweek.org/dd/articles/2011/08/11/mct_pacyber.html

By the time he started first grade, Stephen Boyd knew that the normal public school system wasn't for him.

He said he was harassed by other students in the Reading School District and didn't feel comfortable attending classes. So, he and his family decided to try something different.

He enrolled in the Pennsylvania Leadership Charter School, a cyberschool that would allow him to learn mostly from home through his computer and an Internet connection.

A few years later, Stephen's younger brother, Andrew, followed suit when he reached school age. Nearly a decade later, the brothers say they are thrilled with their choice.

But not everyone is so high on the online schools.

Critics continue to point to the hefty financial burden cybercharters place on public school districts. And critics have long said that cyberschools don't perform as well as traditional schools, and they have some data to back that.

According to data for the 2009-10 school year, the most recent data available, seven of the 11 cybercharters in Pennsylvania that participated in state standardized testing did not make the grade.

In Berks County, only one public school district—Reading—failed to meet the state standards. But proponents of the schools say cybercharter schools have advantages that can't be standardized.

Perfect Fit for Some

For Stephen and Andrew, attending a cyberschool has worked out perfectly, they say.

"Definitely for me, I really like the flexibility," said Stephen, 17, an incoming 12th-grader. "I'm very active outside of school and I would have been overwhelmed trying to do a normal school day. With the cyberschool, I can do both but still have a quality education."

Each school day, Stephen and Andrew wake up and log onto their computers. They check out messages from their teachers, look over lesson plans and do work completing assignments. Their school ships them text books, and even provides things like science kits.

The brothers watch lectures, take tests and submit reports—all online.

And with about 2,000 total students, their cyberschool is able to offer a wide variety of courses—everything from advanced math classes to Chinese.

The brothers even have chances to interact with other students, they say. The school organizes field trips and even has a few on-site programs.

Stephen takes part in an on-site gifted program, and Andrew does the same for the performing arts.

"It's not like we're shut off from our community," Stephen said. "If anything is going to get in the way of me seeing my friends it's their school schedule."

All in all, the boys say, cybercharters have proven to be the perfect choice.

Test Scores in Question

Those who support cybercharters also say those progress numbers based on the standardized tests can be misleading.

Dr. Jim Hanak, CEO of Pennsylvania Leadership Cyber Charter School, said cybercharters have a more difficult time with the PSSA tests because they're treated as both an individual school and a school district.

He pointed out that many districts had schools that failed to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) on the PSSAs, but still managed to pass as an overall district.

Hanak also said cybercharters are impacted by the types of students who choose to attend. For the most part, he said, they are either the top performers or the bottom.

"For many, we are the school of last resort," he said, explaining that the low-end students often have disciplinary problems or arrive several grade levels behind. "They're really misplaced in our school, but we're a public school so we can't turn them away."

Hanak said he believes the increasing pressure of the PSSAs is leading some districts to push their struggling students to cybercharters.

"We are finding more and more, because of the pressures of AYP, schools tell struggling kids to try a charter school," he said. "And all they're doing is dropping their trouble students on us."

Costs Called Hefty

Most educators say they support the concept of cyberschools; Many have started their own or work with the Berks County Intermediate Unit's cybercharter. But the way they're set up in Pennsylvania, educators say, is putting a hurt on local districts, especially financially.

"The numbers speak for themselves," said Dr. Martin Handler, Brandywine Heights superintendent.

Brandywine spent more than \$400,000 last school year paying for 36 students to go to cybercharters.

Handler said that his district's own virtual academy costs less than half per student of what cybercharters are paid. And since cybercharters are paid based on a state-created formula, there is no detailed bill or itemized invoice to see how exactly cyberschools are spending their cash.

"Where's the extra money going?" Handler said.

Dr. Paul B. Eaken, Fleetwood superintendent, said he would prefer that a cybercharter submit an invoice detailing the cost of educating a student.

Related Blog

"I don't think it should be a one-price-fits-all," he said. "I think it should be based on the actual cost and audited by the state."

The way the system currently works, Eaken said, is basically using tax dollars to provide profits to private companies.

Discouraging Enrollment

Dr. Edward Albert, Tulpehocken superintendent, said he's been trying to get fewer students from his district to enroll in cybercharters.

"I'm on a mission to keep cutting this back," Albert said of the \$570,000 his district paid for 47 students to attend cybercharters. "Some of these schools have a very well-planned communication process to lure parents in."

Albert said that he contacts every family that enrolls a student for a cybercharter school—a tactic that is being mirrored in several other local districts. Albert's hope is that they will consider the district's own cyberschool, which ends up saving the district a good bit of money.

Albert said he understands the push behind cyberschools. There are schools across the state that are not performing up to par,

he admits.

But, he added, that doesn't mean that every school district should be punished.

"I think in general our schools provide a quality education, and I think that's based on the school, the kid and the parent," he said. "If one Volvo doesn't work well, do they recall all the Volvos? You go after the ones that aren't performing."

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FLORIDA NEWS

Florida a leader in setting reading standards

Associated Press

By: Staff

August 11, 2011

<http://www.goerie.com/article/20111108110804>

A new federal report shows Florida is a leader in setting reading proficiency standards but lags a bit in math.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress report released Thursday ranks Florida second for eighth grade and 13th for fourth grade reading standards.

Florida's math standards rank 15th for fourth grade and 26th for eighth grade.

State Education Commissioner Gerard Robinson said Florida set a high bar early on for reading standards.

The state also has recently updated its math standards but not all of those changes were captured by the national report.

It compares how state measurements of student achievement compare to national proficiency standards.

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Florida: Advanced Placement Boot Camp teaching key skills needed for advanced coursework

St. Petersburg Times

By: Jeffrey S. Solochek

August 12, 2011

<http://www.tampabay.com/news/education/k12/mitchell-high-ap-boot-camp-teaching-key-skills-needed-for-advanced/1185552#comments>

TRINITY — Two groups of 22 Mitchell High School Advanced Placement students stared at "spider webs" of PVC piping and bungee cords as teacher Andrea Berry-Guth gave them directions.

The goal: Get every person through the web, with the faster team winning. The hitch: Touching the cord would tack on extra time.

Only two people could use each hole in the web, some low to the ground and others near the ceiling. Once they made it to the other side, there was no going back to help teammates.

More than 400 Mitchell students attempted to solve this challenge and several others Thursday as part of the school's first AP Boot Camp. The event, assistant principal Angie Murphy said, aimed to help students focus on five key skills — teamwork, organization, critical reading, problem solving and communication — that will help them succeed in their advanced coursework, and in life generally.

"AP is not surface thought," Murphy advised the students as they gathered in the gym to begin the six-hour day. "What we're going to do is push beyond."

To make it fun, the teachers — all in camo colors — also turned the boot camp into a contest with lots of prizes. And those who attended got out of a lengthy writing assignment that counted for up to 10 percent of their summer AP preparation grade.

That was enough to lure many of the students who otherwise would have preferred to spend the sunny vacation day away from school.

"I don't want to do a huge project," said sophomore John Schwindt, 15, who will take his first AP course this year in world history.

Most made the best of it, actively participating in the games and hands-on activities, and keeping in mind the important lessons that bolstered each.

"I think it's going to prepare me pretty well for AP," said sophomore Katie Selby, 16, after her team hoisted her through one of the top holes of its spider web. "You see how much work it's going to be and how serious you have to get."

Plus, she added, "It's good to see everyone again after the summer."

Before starting the web challenge, Selby's team plotted strategy. They would send two tall people first, keeping two other tall members on the opposite side so they could lift and pass some of the smaller teammates through the highest holes.

They thought about keeping at least one of the lowest holes unused for the final members to get through easily, though it didn't work out that way.

Senior Taylor Breuning, 16, was one of the last ones through, lifted and "speared" through the middle by fellow senior Tyler Smith. He said he understood that solving problems like this would help when taking AP exams next spring.

"Everybody is working together," said Breuning, who took two AP courses last year and will take one this year. "And we all had to be organized to figure out which holes are closed, who goes when."

Throughout the day, teams spent time looking at time management strategies, talking about careful reading and even discussing the temptation to cheat.

Smith said she hoped that the students would come together as a community, learn how to network and how to use their learning skills throughout life. Passing an AP exam is only part of the picture, she said, though quickly noting that Mitchell's participation and passing rates were tops in Pasco County last year.

"It's enough to take AP because it does push them," Smith said. "Even kids that don't pass are going to be better off in the end."

Cristina Crane, who graduated from Mitchell in 2010, shared that view. Crane, who came back to help out at boot camp, finished Mitchell with 57 college credits from AP and dual enrollment courses.

"Yes, if you pass the test, you get the college credit," she acknowledged. "But even if you don't pass the test you still get skills you can use. It's still worth it."

The school will continue to offer AP strategy lessons throughout the year, including monthly support seminars.

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Florida: Hernando County's lone charter school applicant on fast track

St. Petersburg Times

By: Tony Marrero

August 12, 2011

<http://www.tampabay.com/news/education/k12/hernandos-lone-charter-school-applicant-on-fast-track/1185539>

BROOKSVILLE — Hernando County is still a frontier of sorts when it comes to charter schools, with just one in a district of roughly 23,000 students.

That was looking to change recently when three organizations submitted letters to the Hernando school district announcing their intent to apply for a charter to open schools here in time for the 2012-13 school year.

But when the Aug. 1 deadline arrived, only one group had applied.

That was from the founders of the already successful Gulf Coast Academy of Science and Technology in Spring Hill. The corporation is seeking a new charter to open Gulf Coast Middle School in the fall of 2012.

The science-centered curriculum would be identical to Gulf Coast's existing middle school on Tillery Road in Spring Hill, and the schools would share the same board of directors, said Joseph Gatti, director of curriculum and development.

The Spring Hill school would start its first year with 88 sixth- and seventh-graders who would filter into the eighth grade, and the enrollment would increase to 110 students by the second year and hold there for a few years.

Gulf Coast has an extensive waiting list and students who aren't picked in the admission lottery are turned away, said director of administration Nevin Ray Siefert III.

"To keep the small class sizes and the individualized attention that make our school special, we have to replicate it so we can offer it to more students," Siefert said.

The Gulf Coast board had planned to build the school in the Orchard Park area of Spring Hill but pulled its request after neighbors objected. Now the organization has a contract on 6 acres of undeveloped land that was part of the former Pasco-Hernando Community College campus on Spring Hill Drive. PHCC moved its Spring Hill campus to a new site on U.S. 19 last year.

Gulf Coast's application will be on a fast track. Gov. Rick Scott, a staunch supporter of charter schools, signed into law last May a measure that allows "high-performing" charter companies to increase enrollment and open more schools without going through a lengthy approval process.

To achieve high performing status, schools must earn an "A" in the state's accountability system twice in three years and a clean audit for the last three fiscal years.

Charter schools are public schools that operate under a performance contract that frees them from many regulations created for traditional public schools. The schools are still held accountable for academic and financial results.

One of the other two letters of intent came from the iGeneration Leadership Academy, based in Hollywood, Fla. The school for grades six through 12 would provide "individualized and personalized educational paths ... through a blended model of virtual and campus attendance," chief executive officer Kin Griffith wrote.

The goal was to open next year with as many as 300 students. By 2016-17, the school would add grades three, four and five and have 1,500 students.

The company put out feelers in several Florida counties to find founding board members and came up short in Hernando, Griffith said. The plan is to garner more support in the coming months and submit an application next year. In the meantime, Griffith said, the company will focus its efforts in the three counties where it did submit applications: Pasco, Pinellas and Hillsborough.

iGeneration's model of computer-based instruction on an actual campus sounds a lot like the new approach at the district's Endeavor Academy in Brooksville. Formerly the STAR Center, the school will still serve at-risk youngsters with behavioral issues but also seeks to attract a more diverse population of students who would benefit from online courses.

There is plenty of room here for similar schools, Griffith said.

"I think having a choice is always a good thing for the student," he said. "Two schools that have similar blended models will have different cultures."

The third letter of intent came from Coastal University Academy Inc., which planned to apply for charter for a middle school serving a minimum of 250 students. The letter provided no other details.

Christopher Bibbo, the Coastal representative who signed the letter, is a former Hernando County teacher who works as a guidance counselor at Nature Coast Technical High School in Brooksville.

He declined to comment on the school except to say the group decided it wasn't a good time to move forward with the effort.

Conspicuously absent was a letter of intent and application from the group that applied last year to open Hernando's first fine arts charter school.

The plan for the Infusion! School of the Arts had called for a yet-to-be-determined Spring Hill location to serve students in grades six through 12, offering programs in dance, drama, instrumental music, vocal music and the visual arts, with possible additions later. The artistic disciplines would be incorporated into the core curriculum.

The district's charter school application review committee recommended that the School Board deny the application, citing concerns about flawed enrollment projections, an incomplete budget and service to exceptional students. The day before the board was slated to consider the application, Infusion president Merritt Tilson announced the group was withdrawing its application to address the committee's areas of concern and re-submit the application this summer.

That was still the goal until about May, said Scott Tilson, Merritt's husband and an Infusion board member. But as the education funding picture grew ever darker for the state, the board decided to put the effort on hold, Scott Tilson said.

"We know the product is viable, we know the need is essential," he said. "We'll just have to see how things go."

Though the Legislature and governor are supportive of charters, the gloomy economy and cuts to education funding can be daunting challenges for fledgling efforts, Hernando superintendent Bryan Blavatt said.

"It's a scary thing," Blavatt said. "Not only the declining size of our economy but also the declining size of our community."

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STATE NEWS

Indiana Bests Florida as Top Education Reform State

Sunshine State News

By: Kenric Ward

August 12, 2011

<http://www.sunshinestatenews.com/story/indiana-bests-florida-top-education-reform-state>

Indiana toppled Florida as the leading education-reform state in 2011, according to a competition conducted by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute on Thursday.

In a vote by "Ed Reform Idol" judges as well as in-studio and online audiences, Indiana finished first among five finalists. The other states were Illinois, Ohio and Wisconsin.

Florida, a perennial leader in school innovation since Gov. Jeb Bush launched reforms in 1999, pushed ahead in 2011 when the Legislature abolished tenure for newly hired teachers, established a performance-based pay system, provided additional pay for high-need subject areas and at-risk schools, and further expanded charter schools and digital learning.

But the failure by Gov. Rick Scott and lawmakers to address collective bargaining in public schools appeared to set Florida back, as Indiana, Ohio and Wisconsin all confronted their politically powerful teacher unions this year.

"We'll tackle collective bargaining next year," said Patricia Levesque, who represented Florida as executive director of the Foundation for Florida's Future.

While Florida fared well in the judges' comments, Jeanne Allen of the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Education Reform suggested that the state may be "resting on its laurels" from reforms instituted in previous years.

Allen also questioned how the state will implement the smorgasbord of reforms passed by the 2011 Legislature, including teacher evaluation and compensation systems.

Levesque, who also heads Bush's Foundation for Excellence in Education, responded that improved parental notification and stricter accountability programs will stop the "dance of lemons" that allows deficient educators to bounce from one campus to another without consequence.

But the judges, selected by the conservative Fordham Institute, were more impressed by Indiana, which abolished collective bargaining for benefits and work rules.

"You can't do [reform] without changing collective bargaining," Indiana schools superintendent Tony Bennett said of his state's progress.

Under Republican Gov. Mitch Daniels, the Hoosier State curbed union clout and collective bargaining without the political backlash experienced in Ohio and Wisconsin. Ohio's Senate Bill 5 could be repealed by a public referendum later this year and Wisconsin has been wracked by union-fueled recall votes.

Meantime, Indiana expanded charter campuses, removed caps on virtual schools and passed what Bennett called "the nation's most expansive voucher program" for low-income students.

And burnishing fiscally conservative credentials, Bennett pointed out that his state Department of Education has just 250 employees overseeing a K-12 system of more than 1 million pupils.

Those accomplishments prompted Matthew Ladner, senior adviser of policy and research for the Foundation for Excellence in Education, to declare: "Indiana may be the pupil that has exceeded the master [Florida]."

After the program, Ladner told Sunshine State News, "Dr. Bennett accurately quoted me, with the key word being 'may' because the Indiana reforms remain in the process of being implemented, so the devil is in the details.

"Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, so what Indiana has done is a tribute to the overwhelming success of Florida's reforms. Florida is still in the lead based upon outstanding reforms and years of successful implementation, but Indiana is certainly making a huge effort to close the gap."

In recognition of the reform movement pushed by Bush, Bennett said, "None of us would be here without Governor Bush and what he started."

On virtually every academic indicator, Florida's classroom performance has markedly improved during the past decade. The state's scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress have gone from near the bottom of the barrel to above national averages. Minority students have posted some of the sharpest learning gains in the country, with stronger participation in Advanced Placement courses.

Michael Petrilli, a Fordham researcher who moderated Thursday's "Idol" competition, said hard-line partisan resistance by union-funded Democrats continues to retard education-reform efforts in many states.

"Getting rank-and-file Democrats to buck their union patrons is a quixotic quest. Asking Republicans to embrace significant reform is a no-brainer," Petrilli observed.

In the absence of bipartisan consensus, Petrilli notes that GOP-dominated legislatures and governors continue to move forward.

"Florida's 10-year experience with path-breaking reform demonstrates that controversial, partisan laws can still lead to substantial progress," he said.

The Florida Education Association, which has fought virtually every school-reform measure in Tallahassee, did not respond to Sunshine State News' request for comment.

Levesque, who did not elaborate on her collective-bargaining comment, issued a statement applauding Indiana and the other states for their work.

"Because of Indiana's reforms, millions of students will be better equipped to succeed in school and beyond.

"The bold education reform represented in the five states that competed for the title speaks to the commitment and dedication of education leaders and advocates across our nation. Each state deserves recognition for these significant accomplishments.

"Student-centered reform is sweeping across our nation. We applaud the reform leaders in every state that are courageously advancing bold reforms that will improve the lives of students across America."

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Transforming Education: Idaho districts hurry to set teacher-bonus strategies

Idaho Statesman

By: Kristin Rodine

August 6, 2011

<http://www.idahostatesman.com/2011/08/06/1751733/idaho-districts-hurry-to-set-teacher.html>

With a Sept. 1 deadline nearing, administrators and teachers throughout Idaho are hammering out local approaches that will help determine who will get bonuses under Idaho's new education reform plan.

Some districts, such as Caldwell, are just beginning the intensive process of choosing how to measure student achievement and whether that achievement will be gauged on a schoolwide basis, by grade level or by other groupings. Other districts are basically finished with their portion of the plan, one of the key elements in state Superintendent Tom Luna's Students Come First education overhaul that passed the 2011 Legislature.

Some districts, including Boise's, are opting to let statewide criteria — based on ISAT scores and improvement — determine the district's pay-for-performance distribution in the first year of the program, and then develop a locally tailored plan in subsequent years.

In Nampa, a committee of teachers and administrators has been working on a local plan for weeks and likely will not finish until shortly before the deadline.

"It's an ongoing process," said Nampa Education Association President Angie Spracher. "At this point, we have a lot of questions."

Meridian teachers and administrators have been meeting in separate committees but will get together later this month to forge a plan, Superintendent Linda Clark said.

"We haven't worked out most of it," Clark said, but the district's plan for gauging student improvement, and thus the rewards for teachers, will likely be based largely on growth in student scores on the district's Measures of Academic Progress test.

"We believe this is what teachers impact, so that's the fair thing to compensate them for," Clark said.

She predicted the district will choose to reward staff "based on whole-school growth. We think that's the fair way to go about not pitting teachers against each other."

'ROBUST DISCUSSION'

"It's important to eliminate as much of the competitive nature as possible," agreed Spracher, who heads the Nampa teachers union and is helping forge the district's plan. "We don't want the whole idea of pay for performance to be so scary that it turns people off."

She said the members of the Nampa Education Association will meet to discuss the proposed local plan Aug. 18, before the

committee signs off on it.

“There’s going to have to be a fair amount of training when the plan is produced,” Spracher said. “I don’t anticipate it’s going to be very well received.”

Making the bonus system equitable for all teachers and other certificated staff — counselors, school nurses and language pathologists, among others — is a major concern, Spracher said.

And the process of determining local criteria is tricky because there are so many choices — 14, including the vague “various other criteria.”

The possibilities for other criteria have been a source of much discussion in the Nampa committee’s weekly meetings in the past month, said communications officer Allison Westfall, who is coordinating the process.

Westfall said there also has been “robust discussion” about one of the options for gauging improvement — student attendance. It’s easy to measure, which makes it attractive, she said. But should teachers be held responsible for it?

ONE DISTRICT’S MODEL

New Plymouth School District Superintendent Ryan Kerby introduced performance pay in his district nearly a decade ago and has seen students flourish.

“We were in the bottom quartile (25 percent) of the state in reading,” Kerby said. “Now, we’re at the top. We haven’t had a single grade under 90 percent proficient (in Idaho Reading Indicator scores) in several years.

“Pay for performance is only one of the many wheels we’re spinning,” he said, but it is a definite factor in student achievement.

The State Department of Education used New Plymouth as a model for the statewide program, and Kerby has been a key player in writing and implementing the plan.

For years, New Plymouth was the only Idaho district using pay for performance, but Weiser adopted the plan this past year, Kerby said.

He sees bonus pay as “a way to thank our teachers for doing a great job.”

“I really believe that when people do a great job and no one expresses appreciation, they’re not as likely to repeat the behavior,” he said. “Our guys are doing a great job. You saw their test scores. They should get something for that.”

TEACHER PARTICIPATION

Kerby stressed that teacher buy-in is essential to a successful pay-for-performance plan. A Stanford University study looking at such plans across the nation singled out New Plymouth for giving teachers input into district goals.

“You’re going to find schools that do that are going to perform better,” he said. The state plan recommends but does not require that districts involve teachers in their decisions. Most districts will, Kerby said.

Bringing teachers in during the summer, their time off, adds a degree of difficulty to the process because many already have other obligations for this time of year, Westfall said. But with a Sept. 1 deadline, it’s essential.

“Getting a lot of feedback has been a challenge because people are on break,” Spracher said.

Districts will be able to tweak their plans during the coming school year and could opt to make changes before the next year.

Boise School District’s committee wants to wait a year before implementing its local plan. Superintendent Don Coberly plans to recommend the school board adopt that recommendation Monday night and use only the state criteria for funds awarded in fall 2012.

“This option gives the district a chance to see where the schools fall in growth and excellence using state criteria before adding the local benchmarks,” Coberly wrote in a memo to the board.

Multiple choices and a tight time frame make things challenging for local districts, and many “are finding the process and the law confusing,” said Julie Fanselow, communications director for the Idaho Education Association.

At its essence, Kerby said, the idea is simple. “It’s really not that big of a deal,” he said. “You set these goals at the first of the year, and they get a check.”

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Preparing for State Tests, to a Hip-Hop Beat

New York Times

By: Sharon Otterman

August 11, 2011

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/12/nyregion/with-fresh-prep-mixing-regents-test-material-with-hip-hop.html?_r=1&ref=education

The team of six high school girls new to America sat frozen waiting for the next missing lyric, whiteboard and marker at the ready. They glanced toward their classmates, who sat nearby, in two competing teams.

One of their instructors, Sam Sellers, otherwise known as Rabbi Darkside, started a beat. Then Jamel Mims, otherwise known as M.C. Tingbudong, began rapping the lyrics of a song whose rhymes did not contain the familiar curses or boasts, but the vocabulary that New York high school students need to pass their Regents test in American history.

“[Follow along closely so it won't get convoluted](#),” Mr. Mims, 25, rapped, flicking his wrist to the beat. “The supreme law of the land is called the ...”

He paused. The girls conferred in their native language, Spanish, scrambled for the marker, and hoisted their whiteboard into the air. “The Constitution!” they shouted in English, reading off their answer.

“Righteous,” M.C. Tingbudong said.

In the realm of dry high school material in New York City, perhaps nothing is drier than Regents exams. The multiple-choice questions often read as if they are straight out of a 1950s textbook — and in fact, the language, showcased in the [state's extensive test archives](#), has remained essentially the same for decades. If there was an opposite of contemporary urban street culture, it might go a little something like this Regents classic:

“Which idea did the founding fathers include in the Constitution that allows Congress to meet the needs of a changing society? 1) federalism 2) separation of powers 3) the elastic clause 4) states' rights.” (The answer can be found below.)

But instead of treating street culture as something that has no place in a classroom, it is being used as a vehicle to deliver instruction. That is the idea behind [Fresh Prep](#), a program run by the [Urban Arts Partnership](#) that is trying to help hard-to-reach students pass the history Regents tests, which they must do to graduate.

“Linguistically, as far as the communities I work in, there is certainly bias toward them in these tests,” Mr. Mims said after a review class recently. A native of Washington, he also teaches Mandarin and got his rap name while studying rap culture in China. “It's an effort to bridge the engagement gap,” Mr. Mims said.

Rap is also lyric-intensive, and its rhymes can be used as a device to help with memorizing facts. So the organization, which has attracted \$400,000 in donations to develop and implement an arts-based Regents review curriculum, reached out to Mr. Sellers (whose rap name comes from being “the Jewish kid in our group of friends” growing up in Buffalo) and Tracee Worley, a history teacher, performance artist and curriculum designer.

Mr. Sellers, 33, had also taught history, so he was on familiar turf when coming up with [two dozen rap songs](#) with rapid-fire lyrics to review global history and American history. Students are given a 250-page workbook in which to fill in the blanks and write answers, and they are supposed to download the songs onto their MP3 players and memorize them at home.

So far, Fresh Prep has shown strong results in the high school where it started with 30 students in 2009 — significantly more students passed that year — and promising results in some classrooms at seven high-poverty high schools where it was used last year, the organization said. But there are still some problems, in part because hip-hop as a review method is hard to teach to a neophyte teacher. Now Urban Arts is revising its strategy to make sure a Fresh Prep artist instructor is always in the room.

“What we found is that when we had instructors who come from a hip-hop pedagogical foundation, the program is implemented with more fidelity,” said Tauheedah Baker-Jones, 33, the manager of the program.

This year, Mr. Sellers and Mr. Mims are teaching a summer class at Gregorio Luperon High School for Science and Mathematics in Washington Heights, a school for Spanish-speaking immigrants who are so new that they learn history in Spanish, not English, and take a Spanish-language version of the exams.

It is their first time trying Fresh Prep in a classroom of students who are still learning English, and on a recent visit, the energy in the 90-minute class was high, but the vocabulary was tough, and the songs moved quickly:

“First Amendment, that's freedom of speech, needed that desperately

Freedom of expression, plus church and state separately

Right to bear arms the deuce, Third the quartering of troops

Four: protection from search and seizure unless a warrant is used.”

Too fast for some, even though they were given [the written lyrics](#).

“It's difficult,” said Yurinda Acevedo, 16, who emigrated from the Dominican Republic in May 2010 and looked slightly

embarrassed as she tried to follow along. “The English is not a piece of cake.” She also did not like the music, and had a suggestion: why not set the history to meringue, or perico ripiao, a Dominican form of that art?

But Wilny Estrella, 17, who has been in the United States for two years and, like most of the students in the class, failed her Regents in June, stood up at the end of class to offer a shout-out of recognition to the teachers. “I wasn’t good at history, but in the days I have been here I have learned a lot,” she said.

Saulio M. Tuero, a bilingual social studies teacher, kept score in the fill-in-the-blank lyrics game — which ended in a three-way tie — and helped out in Spanish, translating the concepts for the students. (The answer to the Regents question above is No. 3.)

Normally, Mr. Tuero said, he reviews material in Spanish, and focuses on teaching test-taking strategies. Because the Regents are so predictable over time, “I know every single question on this test,” he said.

It is an experiment for him to try out Fresh Prep and its curriculum, in part because as the [Department of Education](#) teacher in the room, he is the one who will be held responsible if the students fail when the history Regents is given again next week.

But half of the 20 students in the class also have yet to pass their English Regents, which includes an essay. And in that sense, he said, the hip-hop history review was playing a double role. “I’m not that worried about getting them to pass this test eventually, but the one thing they don’t get enough of is English,” he said. For his students to even read along with the intricate lyrics, he said, “just doing that is like a major advancement.”

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