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NATIONAL NEWS

The Conservative Case for the Common Core

Education Next

By: Chester E. Finn, Jr.

March 9, 2012

<http://educationnext.org/the-conservative-case-for-the-common-core/>

Writing last about the “[war against the Common Core](#),” I suggested that those English language arts and math standards arrived with four main assets. (In case you're disinclined to look, they boil down to rigor, voluntariness, portability, and comparability.)

Let me now revisit a fifth potential asset, which is also the main reason that small-government conservatives should favor the Common Core or other high-quality “national standards”: This is the best path toward getting Uncle Sam and heavy-handed state governments to back off from micro-managing how schools are run and to return that authority to communities, individual schools, teachers, and parents.

It's the path to getting “tight-loose” right in American K-12 education, unlike NCLB, which has it backward. (I refer to the well-known management doctrine that large organizations with many parts should be “tight about ends, loose about means.”) The proper work of conservatives going forward is to stop doing battle with the Common Core and instead do their utmost to ensure that the “loose” part gets done right. This could also be the path toward a [viable political compromise on NCLB/ESEA reauthorization](#).

Common Core or other high-quality “national standards” are the best path toward getting Uncle Sam to back off from micro-managing how schools are run. Photo by DonkeyHotey.

Some on the Right don't yet see any need for compromise because they expect to be in the driver's seat in both houses of Congress and the Oval Office after November. Maybe that will happen. Maybe John Kline will have his way in the 113th Congress and at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., meaning that future federal K-12 dollars will be turned over to states with essentially no strings attached.

But I wouldn't stake our kids' future on the election working out that way. And even if it were to, there's never yet been an ESEA reauthorization that wasn't bipartisan to some extent. Which suggests to me that compromise is going to be needed and “tight-loose” is the right basis for it.

Here's the core proposition: If all U.S. public schools embraced the same rigorous standards (for their curricular core), were assessed on the same tests, and had their results made public via a transparent system, then everybody would know how their own schools are doing and could decide for themselves whether to (a) leave things be, (b) demand a makeover, or (c) move their kids to other schools.

Communities would have grounds to rally in support of their schools, to fire the school board, to encourage charters and other innovators and entrepreneurs to arrive, etc. State-level voters would have grounds to fire the governor or legislature at the next

election and to vote for higher or lower education taxes in the next referendum. Employers would know where to locate their education-intensive plants and offices and where to avoid. Philanthropists would know where to invest—or not. Reformers would know where to intervene with what. Above all, parents would know how content (or not) to be with the schools attended by their own kids.

Uncle Sam could then cease and desist from telling states and districts how to run their schools, how to “qualify” and evaluate their teachers, how and on what to spend their money, what to do about low-performing schools, to whom and how to provide choices among which sorts of schools and how many of them, etc.

But “loose” isn’t going to happen all by itself. Literally hundreds of federal programs (starting with but by no means limited to Title I and IDEA) will need to be reshaped by statute (or consolidated or abolished) for “loose” to work.

The brainpower and policy energy needed to prepare for that enormous undertaking isn’t going to be available if conservatives in the education space spend all their time battling against the “tight” part of the deal.

Remember, too, that “tight” is voluntary and should stay that way. No state needs to buy into the Common Core or the assessments now under development—as Education Secretary Arne Duncan [underscored in a letter](#) this week to Utah’s state superintendent. (An important question for potential compromisers, however: If a state doesn’t accept “tight,” how much “loose” does it get and on what basis?)

Let me restate the essence of the compromise I’m suggesting: If everybody’s schools use the same academic targets and metrics to track their academic performance—duly reported by demographic subgroup, perhaps by individual classrooms, too—and if everybody has access to this information via a transparent reporting system, a powerful case can be made for getting “big government” to back away from managing schools. This case would be strengthened further if the education dollars—from every source—also accompany individual pupils to the schools they actually attend. Then those schools can and should be freed up to “run themselves” in the ways that matter most: budget, staffing, curriculum, schedule, and more. They can decide for themselves whether to pool resources for various external purchases and back-office operations (and where to obtain those). They can also decide for themselves what to teach on top of the “common” standards in the same or additional subjects. Schools will be freer than today to specialize in, say, art/music, STEM, technical-vocational education or history and literature.

This will lead to an overdue revolution in school governance at the state/local level, too, not just in Washington. The role of districts will change dramatically, at least in states that see this through to its logical conclusion. And the demand for outstanding building-level school leadership will soar.

Yes, this could all happen without the Common Core per se. It could be pegged to other widely agreed-upon academic standards and assessments—if such existed. Nor does any of this mean that the standards and assessments should come from the federal government. The tight-loose “compromise,” however, is mainly about the terms accompanying future federal K-12 funding and will need to be incorporated in some workable fashion into federal law.

This will, of course, be attacked from both sides. Some conservatives, as noted, will insist that the voters will soon vindicate their preference for restoring control and authority to states and districts with no expectation of common standards or tests. Some liberals will hate the “loose” part because they don’t trust states, communities, or schools to do right by kids and will therefore want continued heavy regulation from Washington. (How well has *that* worked, folks?)

But that’s the sort of “nobody’s pleased” situation that creates the possibility of compromise. Which would surely be better than today’s reauthorization gridlock *cum* waivers of dubious constitutionality (and continued heavy-handedness).

Compromise means everybody yields some of what’s important to them in return for getting (or keeping) another part that would be jeopardized if they didn’t also yield. It’s a term that’s fallen out of use in Washington of late. Can it return to favor in federal education policy in 2013?

- Chester E. Finn Jr.

This post originally appeared on Fordham Institute’s [Flypaper](#) blog

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Education or Bust

The Daily

By: Mara Gay

March 11, 2012

<http://www.thedaily.com/page/2012/03/11/031112-news-school-moms-arrested-1-5/>

More parents doing time for ‘stealing education’ for kids in better districts

Three years ago, Yolanda Miranda spent the night in jail for grand larceny. Her crime? Stealing an education.

The mother of five turned herself in after she was busted for sending her kids to school in a city where she didn’t live. Miranda, 36, says the schools in Rochester, N.Y., weren’t good enough. So she sent her children to school in the nearby suburb of

Greece, N.Y., instead.

“They put me in a holding cell. They accused me of grand larceny, for stealing education, and I had to laugh,” Miranda told The Daily. “How can you steal an education?”

Miranda isn't the only parent to see the inside of a cell for such a crime. Education experts, investigators and school officials say the number of parents prosecuted for sending children to out-of-district schools has risen steadily in recent years, even as cash-strapped districts are becoming more aggressive about rooting out students who don't belong.

The main offenders seem to be some of the most vulnerable parents in society: poor and single mothers of color who are increasingly refusing to send their children to schools in the failing districts in which they live. They are desperate to provide their kids with a good education — and willing to go to jail to do so.

“If I had to do it again 10 times over, I would,” said Miranda, whose charges were later reduced to a misdemeanor after she pleaded guilty to offering a false instrument for filing, or essentially lying on school enrollment forms. “You feel like you have to take things into your own hands. We have to do whatever we can to give our kids a chance.”

Some feel differently, arguing that the extra students place an unfair burden on taxpayers. Schools across the country have hired investigators to find those students and save districts money.

“Kids are being trained by their parents in how to commit fraud,” said Jimmie Mesis, an owner of Verify Residence, a New Jersey-based company that helps public schools identify out-of-district students. Mesis said business is booming. “Ten years ago we would probably do maybe one investigation per month. Now we're doing two or three of them every single day.”

The issue has become particularly divisive in Connecticut, where along the coast the dignified mansions of Wall Street bankers flirt with some of the poorest cities in the region.

Connecticut's Bridgeport-Stamford-Norwalk area boasts the most unequal income distribution of any metropolitan area in the country, according to census data. In that area of the state — home to Tanya McDowell, who was sentenced to five years for grand larceny on school theft and drug-related charges last month — the top 5 percent claim a mean income of \$685,000; the bottom 20 percent less than \$15,000.

Those levels of inequality are [worse than those in Zimbabwe](#), and education experts say they have helped turn Connecticut into a kind of ground zero for the fight against what activists are calling “ZIP-code education.”

Last month, Michelle Rhee, one of the most controversial education reformers in the country, joined the fray.

Her StudentsFirst organization told The Daily it is partnering with the Connecticut Parents Union, a grassroots group, to advocate for school choice and fight the criminalization of parents who send children to out-of-district schools.

“This should shatter people's expectations of what they think the problem is in education,” Rhee told The Daily. “People want to paint poor inner-city parents of color with the same broad brush, and say that they don't care, or they don't understand the value of an education,” she said. “Well these parents are showing that they do know what's at stake, and that they're willing to take desperate measures for their children.”

Gwen Samuel, who founded the Connecticut Parents Union last year to address the state's racial achievement gap, which is the worst in the nation, said criminalizing parents for sending their children to out-of-district schools is a poor deterrent.

“You cannot think arresting parents is going to change the fact that these kids need access to better schools,” Samuel said. “And it won't stop mothers from doing everything they can to protect their children's futures.”

But although countless parents are caught sending children to out-of-district schools each year, only certain cases are prosecuted.

“You just gotta look at who it's happening to,” says Kelley Williams-Bolar, an Akron, Ohio, woman who gained national attention last year when she served 9 days in jail for falsifying records after using her father's address to send her daughters to school in the nearby Copley-Fairlawn district. “They're telling us to stay in our place.”

With some exceptions, parents facing prosecution tend to be poor, single mothers, and women of color. School officials deny that they are targeting any specific group. Privately, they say they are more likely to contact police if they suspect criminal activity of another kind. And some parents, like McDowell, face other criminal charges that may make their cases easier to prosecute.

For many others, though, the arrest is their first.

“They fingerprinted me, took a mugshot. It was terrible. I had never been arrested so I had no idea what they were doing,” said Marie Menard, who was arrested in October 2010 and charged with first-degree larceny and conspiracy for helping enroll her

grandchildren in public school in Stratford, Conn.

Menard, 61, owns a home in Stratford and says she shared informal custody of the grandchildren with her daughter. She is white, but school investigators concluded that the grandchildren, who are of mixed race, were residents of nearby Milford. "They gave others the option to just take the kids out of school, but they didn't give us that option, they just arrested us. Why?"

In Connecticut, state education officials said the decision of which parents to investigate and prosecute is left up to each school district.

Norwalk Public Schools superintendent Susan Marks said the district tries to be sensitive to the needs of all families, especially those who may be dealing with homelessness or shared custody arrangements. She said guidelines for investigating student residency are largely informal.

"Sometimes we look into it because of some indication that a child doesn't live in the district," Marks said. "They may be late all the time or they're waiting at the end of the day for someone to pick them up. It just is not very scientific actually."

Stratford superintendent Irene Cornish did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

Ronald Harris, attorney for the Connecticut Department of Education, said that for most schools, identifying out-of-district students is a question of resources. In Connecticut, educating each student can run a district upward of \$13,000 a year.

"They do the best they can to protect their borders and keep the cost down," Harris said. "Who they go after is their decision as to who they think is not a resident."

Bill Beitler, the owner of National Investigations, an Illinois-based company that specializes in school residency, said not all districts play fair.

"Some might flag the special-education students, or pull one over on me and try to flag the African-American families or the Hispanic families. Sometimes it's, 'Leave all the football players alone but check everybody else,'" Beitler said. "So I draft up a contract that says you can't do that. I've seen everything."

Despite the risks, many parents said the decision to send their child to an out-of-district school is an easy one.

"They said I had to pick up my son from the school or they would issue a warrant for my arrest," said a mother of three in Hartford, Conn., who asked to remain anonymous because her other children are still attending schools in Windsor, Conn. "But in Hartford, somebody was always trying to rob my son. In Windsor, he won a scholarship. He's on the honor roll. He's the captain of the football team."

The woman, 40, said she graduated from Hartford schools functionally illiterate. "I knew what they did to me, pushed me out without being able to read and write," she said. "I was determined that my child wasn't going to get caught up in that system."

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STATE NEWS

Louisiana Governor Jindal pushes schools bills quickly

Associated Press

By:Melinda Deslatte

March 9, 2012

<http://www.theadvertiser.com/article/20120310/NEWS01/203100314/Jindal-pushes-schools-bills-quickly>

BATON ROUGE — Gov. Bobby Jindal is pushing to fast-track his education proposal with lawmakers, with the centerpiece bills scheduled for hearings within days of the legislative session's start Monday.

"We don't expect to waste any time," Jindal said Friday in an interview with The Associated Press.

The plans will kick off the three-month regular session with a speedier pace than usual. Jindal is proposing to revamp teacher pay and job protection laws, to create a statewide voucher program that uses state dollars to send children to private schools, to expand charter schools in the state and to grade Louisiana's early childhood programs.

Most of the measures face opposition from traditional public school leaders and teacher unions that say Jindal's trying to dismantle the public education system. They also argue the changes could leave the neediest and most at-risk children left in underfunded public schools.

The ideas were unveiled by the Republican governor in January, setting off an informal debate for the last two months.

"Whether you're interested in lowering incarceration rates, improving health care outcomes or growing our economy, it all comes

back to education," Jindal said. "We want to make sure we give every child the opportunity for a great education. Everybody says they're for that, but the

reality is our policies don't accomplish that today."

Critics question if the governor's proposing too much change with too little time for debate.

The House Education Committee is scheduled to spend Wednesday considering the governor's proposals, with the companion Senate committee eyeing a similar hearing Thursday.

The committees are packed with and led by allies of the governor.

A spokesman for the Louisiana Federation of Teachers said Jindal is trying to radically restructure public education and get the bills on their way to passage before lawmakers understand the full impact of the changes. Les Landon said the LFT is sending letters to

education committee members, "urging them to slow down the train."

"Each one of these bills has lots and lots of elements, and each of the elements is a radical change from past practice. It would truly be a disservice to teachers and to students if they try to ram them through without giving them proper consideration," Landon said.

Jindal cites statistics that show Louisiana in the bottom five states for national achievement tests, one-third of public school students performing below grade level and 44 percent of schools graded at a D or F level in a statewide scale.

"It is not fair to tell those kids to just wait while we make incremental progress. They only get one chance to get a great education," Jindal replied Friday.

The governor calls the education bills his top priority, followed by his package of proposals to overhaul retirement benefits for rank-and-file state employees.

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Teacher Evaluation Pilot

New Jersey Spotlight

By: John Mooney

March 12, 2012

<http://www.njspotlight.com/stories/12/0312/0304/>

Early reaction positive, but plenty of concerns

It's still very early days for New Jersey's controversial teacher evaluation system -- now in limited pilot projects across the state - but reports from the front lines are starting to filter in.

Most of the feedback from teachers and administrators has been positive. Both relish the renewed focus on what's happening in the classroom and their renewed dialogue, at least that's the upshot of the latest NJ Spotlight Roundtable, held this past weekend.

Carol Boehm, a music teacher for 10 years in Red Bank Borough, said the pilot's focus so far on classroom observations had spurred valuable conversations about the craft of teaching.

"Anyone who hears the word change, anyone is going to be a little scared and apprehensive," she said. "But once we started going through the process and the training, we really understood the value of it.

"We have come around and understood how important it is and how much more important is the open dialogue we have been able to have," Boehm added.

But at least one administrator, who values the opportunities offered by the new program, spoke openly about the heavy demand it puts on his time.

Brian Gismondi, principal of West Deptford High School, said he now directly evaluates 22 teachers, with each evaluation and its pre- and post-conferences taking considerably more attention.

"It is busy, I'm not going to lie to you. My day has changed and my day as an instructional leader has changed," he said.

"You have to run your building, manage your building, the paperwork, the parent phone calls," he said.

"It's not just evaluation. Most of my day now I spend in classrooms with teachers, talking with them. Not that it isn't worthwhile, but you need to change what you are doing and how you do it. I have pushed myself to a different limit than I ever had to," he added.

And one teacher, Tanya Tenturier of Elizabeth's Terence C. Reilly School, who also gave many aspects of the pilot high marks, said the state tests at the end of the year leave her uneasy.

"Honestly I am not sure the point of it all," she said. "My students are demonstrating on a daily basis that they are capable and what their strengths and weaknesses are, I'm not about the big culmination at the end of the year."

NJ Spotlight's Roundtable on the state's new teacher evaluation system brought together teachers and administrators from three of the pilot districts, as well as Robert Fisicaro the manager of the pilot for the state Department of Education, and Peter Shulman, the state assistant commissioner of education whose office is spearheading the pilot and the policy that will come out of it.

The Saturday morning event took place before an audience of more than 100 educators, advocates, and others at the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association in Monroe.

Red Bank's Boehm was not the only one to stress the value of observation (essentially, the first phase of the new evaluation program).

Laura Morana, the superintendent in Red Bank, conducted Boehm's first observation and said she, too, gained a great deal.

"We have had to do a great deal of learning in a short period of time, at all levels, including myself," she said.

"It's really allowing the teacher and the evaluator to have a meaningful discussion about teaching and learning, and the next steps."

Gismondi who discussed the additional hours the new observations were adding to his day also said the pilot has led to a whole change in the professional climate in his building.

"We're going through a culture change for the first time in my history there," he said of his dozen years as an administrator. "We are having conversations that are in depth to education and to resources and to what is happening in the classroom.

"Not just once in a while and during evaluation but it's happening all the time," he said. "That's the culture change. Administration conversations have changed, teacher conversations have changed."

Tenturier, a second year math teacher, also said the meetings with administrators to discuss lessons ahead of time are extremely valuable.

"I can show how I will differentiate instruction, I can communicate so much more through the current pilot," she said. "I feel in that way teachers are able to advocate for themselves and show more of the reflection."

Still, as the districts continue to hone the observation aspects of the evaluations, challenges have emerged as well, including the capacity of schools both in cost and time to develop reliable systems.

Morana in Red Bank said the cost is about \$75,000 for her small district, much of it in training and time, but it's not just financial resources.

"How do we go about completing those evaluations, two for tenured teachers, three for non-tenured, in a way that is a comprehensive manner without rushing through the process?" she said.

Robert Fisicaro, both manager of the pilot and former elementary school principal, said the resources to complete quality training are vital.

Panelists repeatedly said the training was critical in building a sense of trust with supervisors and an assurance everyone is looking at the same things.

"The importance of the training cannot be overstated," Fisicaro said. "Teachers have to have a clear picture of the criteria to which they are evaluated. "

Assistant commissioner Shulman acknowledged that the capacity issues -- such as those Gismondi discussed -- are not just at the local level.

"Capacity is an issue, a significant challenge from Trenton down to the classroom to make this work," he said.

"This has to be woven into the fabric of what you are doing," he said. "It does take time and resources, and when looking at the

prioritizing in the schools, this is a difficult thing to do."

The toughest debate came down to using student performance measures in evaluating teachers. While it is months away from being applied in the pilot districts and schools, the teachers on the panel were not averse to it. The state's system will use a complex formula that weighs student progress against their peers.

Boehm as a music teacher does not see her students take a state test and said she has begun with other music teachers in the district to develop their own.

"I'm actually a little excited about this," she said, explaining new assessments in playing the recorder. "This is our opportunity to show that we have standards we want to meet, and be able to show that are students are meeting those standards."

The state test, on the other hand, is already a central presence in Tenturier's job as a math teacher in Elizabeth, for good or ill.

"The first thing I get as a teacher is a breakdown of where they scored the highest and where they scored the lowest," she said. "I pre-assess, I post-assess, I assess the assessments."

Shulman tried to downplay the weight of any single student measure, saying the test scores would be significant but just one component of the overall evaluation. He said the use of student scores for teacher evaluation remained an "emerging field" in both policy and research. But he nonetheless stood by the scores as an important and objective measure that needed to be considered.

"We believe in having a common measuring stick," he said directly to Tenturier. "And for all the great work that you do, we can't be sure every educator is doing that."

Shulman repeatedly stressed that the state was listening to the concerns and had already extended the timeline for the pilot into next year, when up to 30 districts will be included. (The pilots are currently running in 10 districts and 19 additional schools.)

"For some we are moving too fast, and for others not fast enough," he said.

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Grading teachers: Indiana's massive education reform will create 'a culture shift'

Indianapolis Star

By: Scott Elliott and Sarah Butrymowicz

March 11, 2012

<http://www.indystar.com/article/20120311/LOCAL/203110358?odyssey=mod|mostcom>

Next school year, educators will be evaluated in a new way. The goal: Get rid of bad teachers.

Reform. There is perhaps no idea more embraced in education circles nationally -- and especially here.

Indiana is in the midst of a massive education reform effort that includes the creation of vouchers, increasing the number of charter schools and adopting a new system to hold schools accountable. For the first time, that includes taking control of failing schools away from districts.

It could be argued, however, that no reform measure will have more impact in the classroom than a new state program that is being piloted in six Indiana school districts and is about to be unleashed in every school across the state.

Beginning next school year, the way teachers are evaluated -- in essence graded -- will change dramatically. The result, reformers predict, is that large numbers of bad teachers will be tossed out, good teachers will be rewarded, and teacher quality will be raised in classrooms across Indiana.

"This whole process . . . has the possibility of really transforming education," said Thomas Hunter, superintendent of Greensburg Community Schools, which is a pilot site for the state's model evaluation system this year. "In very few years, there will not be a poor teacher in a classroom."

The legislature passed a law last year that will require annual evaluations. Here's how the system will work:

Teachers across the state will be rated 1 through 4, with 1 being the lowest. Those ratings will be based in part on the test scores of their students.

The ratings come with consequences.

Those who receive ineffective ratings can be dismissed at the end of the school year. After two years, anyone twice rated as needing improvement -- teachers rated a 1 or 2 -- also can be fired. Teachers rated in the bottom two categories also can be blocked from receiving a raise.

"This is a culture shift," said Mindy Schlegel, who leads a new division within the Indiana Department of Education focused on educator effectiveness. "This is saying, 'If you're not good, you don't deserve a raise.' "

How significant is this change? Consider this: Currently, many teachers are not observed even once a year. Few are rated poor.

The reform is championed by Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Bennett, who thinks the current system, which leaves evaluation up to each school, does not address poor performance. He pointed to a Department of Education study of a sample of school districts that showed 99 percent of teachers were rated effective.

Bennett calls that a "statistical impossibility."

And while most education reforms have spurred politically polarizing rhetoric, there is general consensus on the need for improved teacher evaluations in Indiana.

Indiana State Teachers Association President Nate Schnellenberger has repeatedly called for "fair, rigorous evaluation" for every teacher.

Many school districts have little in the way of a functioning evaluation process -- and it varies greatly from one district to another. Often, an evaluation consists only of a less-than-formal classroom observation by a principal or vice principal.

One of those models being piloted in Indiana is nationally known, and the other is the state's self-created design. Districts may adopt one of those approaches, tweak their existing model to conform to the state's model, or create their own -- as long as the state determines it complies with the new law.

The Warren Way

Few districts are better poised for the change than Warren Township, which has been refining a homemade evaluation system for 15 years.

The district was chosen as a state model site because it already regularly reviews teachers, creates intervention plans for those who struggle and has the option to fire those who do not improve after a second level of intensive help.

The changes the district is making to fit the state model are mostly minor. For example, ratings were changed from effective or not effective to the state's four-point scale, and observations for veteran teachers will be annual instead of every three years.

The district also is working on incorporating student test score growth as a factor in its process for the first time.

"Our expectations for teachers and principals have been very high," Assistant Superintendent Mary Rehlander said.

Ryan Russell, the principal at Raymond Park Intermediate Academy, has found Warren Township's process helps people first to figure out if teaching is for them and then how to teach at their highest level.

"I tell new teachers the difference between being a great teacher and leaving the profession is how you respond when you're knocked on your tail," he said. "How resilient are you?"

Russell's teachers receive a very clear outline of the expectations on which they are graded. Reviews start with short visits, usually about five minutes, some unannounced, that he or an assistant principal makes regularly. Twice a year, the administrators perform a full evaluation for new teachers. Altogether, new teachers commonly are observed as many as 20 times a year. This is being extended to all teachers.

Most feedback is simple and technical. Take, for example, this scene that played out recently.

Russell was observing Jen Hess' fifth-grade class when he noticed something subtle from his seat in the back of the class: The highest achievers in the room were tuning out.

Russell mentioned it to Hess. By the next day, Hess had a new game plan.

"I adjusted my lesson," she said. "Instead of keeping them all with me, I had the higher-level kids meet in a small group. Their discussion took it to a higher place."

For Russell -- and Hess -- this is what a teacher evaluation should look like. The best teachers, Russell said, will take even the most minor concern and kick it around until they find a solution.

"It's not a 'gotcha' approach," Russell said. "I can say a simple sentence or ask a question, then walk away. That will bring more change for student learning than rating her with a number."

Sometimes, Russell said, multiple observations reveal recurring problems. That leads to a meeting called "problem solving," in which the teacher and administrator discuss concerns, create a plan to solve them and establish a timeline.

"It doesn't start the first time we see something," Russell said. "We have a very specific assistance technique."

If the problem is resolved within the timeline, the process ends. If not, teachers face intensive intervention. This involves a team of about five fellow teachers and the principal.

Over a new time frame, often a semester, team members conduct observations and give feedback and advice. If the teacher improves, the process goes back to the less intense problem-solving level.

If not, the team can recommend to the superintendent to cancel the teacher's contract.

"We don't take lightly people's careers," Russell said, "but my measuring stick revolves around leadership with the children in the classroom."

Greensburg 'RISES'

This year, Greensburg is piloting the state's model system, known as RISE.

Teachers will be observed five times throughout the course of the year -- three times for 12 to 15 minutes and twice for 40 to 60 minutes. Administrators will catalog what they see and then meet with teachers to dissect performance. Teachers will receive training to help them improve.

Next year, when the system is fully implemented, observation will make up three-quarters of a teacher's overall evaluation grade, with scores for planning, leadership and core professionalism added in as well. (Greensburg is still figuring out how test scores will be factored in.)

The district quickly learned principals are the key to making RISE work well.

It's shifted the focus of their work heavily toward how teaching happens in their schools.

Greensburg Junior High School Principal Dave Strouse, for example, said he no longer has time to be in the cafeteria during lunch and now must split bus duty with an assistant principal. Parents who used to have easy access to him at school more often need to call ahead to schedule a meeting.

"The hard part is giving meaningful feedback," Strouse said. "That's why it takes so long."

Surveys conducted by the Department of Education show that nearly 39 percent of school systems plan on adopting RISE, and 38 percent will try to adapt what they already do. The state is prepping itself to train hundreds of administrators with a four-day session in the summer and more follow-ups in the fall.

Indiana is far from alone in its pursuit of a new system to evaluate teachers.

Florida passed legislation last year mandating districts craft new evaluation systems that will require yearly evaluations and use student test score data for at least 50 percent of an overall score.

Also last year, Massachusetts lawmakers approved overhauling their system. Education advocates in the state are working on a ballot initiative that would link teacher evaluation results to staffing decisions.

Tennessee's new teacher evaluation system, which includes multiple observations and student surveys, was rolled out this school year.

A recent joint research effort called Measuring of Effective Teaching, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, found the more often teachers are evaluated, the more likely their effectiveness ratings would match closely with the success or failure in test performance of their students.

Indiana's new evaluation process is expected to generate huge amounts of data. Schlegel, the state administrator who is leading the new department focused on educator effectiveness, said what those data say, and how districts adjust, will spell success or failure.

The hope is that the Indiana Department of Education will not only be able to judge how well the plans were executed, she said, but also use the data to ask useful questions. Are low-performing teachers improving or leaving the profession? How are the best teachers distributed among schools? Is teacher retention improving?

"There will be data that no one has now," Schlegel said. "There are so many layers of information that (are) interesting and issues we can address."

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Florida: Tense fight over school 'parent trigger' bill ends in its defeat

Tampa Bay Times

By: Kathleen McGrory

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<http://www.tampabay.com/news/education/k12/florida-senate-kills-parent-trigger-bill/1219197>

TALLAHASSEE — The well-financed, politically savvy backers of the parent trigger bill thought it would be a sure thing.

Opponents knew it would be a dogfight.

In the end, it came down to a dramatic, last-minute vote in the sharply divided Florida Senate.

A coalition of Democrats and Republicans on Friday mustered the 20 votes needed to defeat SB 1718, which would have enabled parents to demand sweeping changes at low-performing schools. Among the options: having the school converted into an independently run charter school.

"This bill would have dismantled and defunded our public education system," said Senate Minority Leader Nan Rich, D-Weston, who fought against the proposal. "It would have allowed private, for-profit (charter school) management companies to take advantage of our public assets."

Supporters insisted it was never about privatizing schools, but rather empowering parents.

"It is a sad day for Florida's parents and students when 20 Senate members vote against giving parents the tools they need to improve their child's persistently failing school," said Patricia Levesque, executive director of former Gov. Jeb Bush's Foundation for Florida's Future.

From the start of the 60-day session, the parent trigger was among the most hotly debated bills.

Its earliest opponents: a coalition of parent groups that included the Florida Parent Teacher Association. Almost immediately after the bill was filed, the coalition distributed a stinging press release, claiming the proposal really sought to line the pockets of for-profit school management companies, which would have access to new contracts.

"This was never really about parents," said Mindy Gould, legislative chair of the Florida PTA.

The parents stayed involved, testifying at committee meetings and participating in press conferences.

But supporters, including Bush's foundation and a California nonprofit called Parent Revolution, responded with an aggressive media campaign of their own. They invited parents from California, where similar legislation passed last year, to speak about how the legislation had transformed their schools and communities. Some delivered tearful testimonials.

The pace picked up in the final days of session.

Gov. Rick Scott and national education reformer Michelle Rhee made phone calls in support of the bill. Teachers' unions urged their members to stand up in opposition.

The maneuvering in the Florida Capitol was just as intense.

The bill passed along party lines in the House. But in the more moderate Senate — which had fractured after an attempt to oust future leadership — the parent trigger proposal became a political lightning rod.

Last week, a coalition of Democrats and moderate Republicans blocked an attempt to fast-track the bill to the Senate Floor. Later, a bipartisan group prevented the bill from being added to the calendar.

But with the clock winding down on the legislative session, Rules Chairman John Thrasher, R-St. Augustine, secured a last-minute hearing for the parent trigger proposal.

On Thursday night, the Senate questioned the proposal until 10 p.m. They came back for a debate and vote on Friday afternoon — the very last day of the legislative session.

Sen. Anitere Flores, R-Miami, argued that the legislation could be "truly transformational" in Florida's chronically failing public schools.

Its sponsor, Sen. Lizbeth Benacquisto, R-Fort Myers, pointed out that state and federal law already prescribes reform measures for struggling schools — and that conversion to a charter school is one of them.

But Sen. Evelyn Lynn, R-Ormond Beach, said she had received thousands of letters and phone calls, urging her to oppose the bill. Lynn slammed the California group pushing the proposal, saying its members were oblivious to the education reform already talking place in Florida.

Ultimately, the 12 Senate Democrats and eight maverick Republicans (Lynn, Charlie Dean, R-Inverness; Nancy Detert, R-Venice; Paula Dockery, R-Lakeland; Mike Fasano, R-New Port Richey; Alan Hays, R-Umatilla; Dennis Jones, R-Seminole; and Steve Oelrich, R-Gainesville) banded together to defeat the bill.

The vote represented a stinging loss for Senate leadership — and for Bush's education agenda.

Parent activist Colleen Wood called it a win for moms and dads.

"This shows that the love Florida parents have for their children is stronger than any amount of money that can be put into a lobbying campaign," she said.

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New York City: Nonfiction Curriculum Enhanced Reading Skills, Study Finds

New York Times

By: Anna M. Phillips

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http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/12/nyregion/nonfiction-curriculum-enhanced-reading-skills-in-new-york-city-schools.html?_r=2&ref=education

Children in New York City who learned to read using an experimental curriculum that emphasized nonfiction texts outperformed those at other schools that used methods that have been encouraged since the [Bloomberg administration](#)'s early days, according to a new study to be released Monday.

For three years, a pilot program tracked the reading ability of approximately 1,000 students at 20 New York City schools, following them from kindergarten through second grade. Half of the schools adopted a curriculum designed by the education theorist [E. D. Hirsch Jr.](#)'s [Core Knowledge Foundation](#). The other 10 used a variety of methods, but most fell under the definition of "balanced literacy," an approach that was spread citywide by former Schools Chancellor [Joel I. Klein](#), beginning in 2003.

The study found that second graders who were taught to read using the Core Knowledge program scored significantly higher on reading comprehension tests than did those in the comparison schools.

It also tested children on their social studies and science knowledge, and again found that the Core Knowledge pupils came out ahead. Citywide, budget cuts and the drive to increase scores on the state reading and math exams have led many elementary and middle schools to whittle down their social studies and science instruction.

"This data shows a promising option for principals to consider," said Josh Thomases, the deputy chief academic officer for the city's [Education Department](#).

He said the new curriculum could be useful in helping achieve the new learning targets, known as the Common Core, that New York and most other states have adopted. "As we align curricula and materials with the new Common Core Standards, we look forward to working with this group and others toward a higher standard," he said.

The pilot program and study were started in the 2008-9 school year by Mr. Klein, who worried that students suffered from what he called a "knowledge deficit." The study was conducted by the Education Department and paid for with \$2.4 million in private donations raised by the Fund for Public Schools, a charity that supports department initiatives.

But city officials said it was not an indication that balanced literacy methods should be abandoned. And several proponents of the longstanding approach, including Carmen Fariña, a former deputy chancellor, said the study focused on too few schools to be used in policy decisions.

"I think it's a very problematic study," said Lucy Calkins, a professor at [Columbia University's Teachers College](#) and an architect of the city's balanced literacy program.

"As far as I can tell, they gave resources to 10 schools to support content literacy and then they tested all of the schools on content literacy," she said, adding that there was no way of knowing with what fidelity the 10 comparison schools were using a

form of balanced literacy.

Dr. Hirsch is the author of a number of books on education, including “Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know,” a best seller based on the idea that American schools were teaching children to read in a vacuum, without introducing the background knowledge the children would need to digest higher-level material. The book drew criticism for its insistence that having a common body of knowledge was the basis for America’s national culture.

When he introduced the Core Knowledge pilot program, Mr. Klein said he hoped it could be used to raise eighth graders’ reading scores, which were lagging behind the fourth graders’ gains.

The study found that for each of the three years, students in the Core Knowledge program had greater one-year gains on a brief reading test than their peers in the comparison schools. The difference was most pronounced in kindergarten, when the scores of children following Dr. Hirsch’s method showed increases that were five times those of their peers. By the third year, they were still posting higher scores, but the differences were not as wide. Between the fall and spring of last year, their scores rose 2.5 scale score points, compared with an average gain of 0.9 points in the comparison group. The scale score is based on the number of questions answered correctly, combined with the degree of difficulty of those questions.

On the TerraNova standardized tests on social studies and science, the Core Knowledge students outperformed the comparison group, but on a test of oral reading comprehension and vocabulary their scores were not significantly different.

Under the balanced literacy approach, which was used by seven of the comparison schools and remains the most popular method of teaching reading in the city’s schools, children are encouraged to develop a love of reading by choosing books that are of interest to them. Teachers spend less time directing instruction, and more time overseeing students as they work together.

Reading nonfiction writing is the key component of the Core Knowledge curriculum, which is based on the theory that children raised reading storybooks will lack the necessary background and vocabulary to understand history and science texts. While the curriculum allows children to read fiction, it also calls on them to knowledgeably discuss weather patterns, the solar system, and how ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia compare.

The curriculum may have a particular appeal for city schools beginning to adopt the Common Core standards, which emphasize nonfiction reading and will go into effect in 2014. The Education Department plans to solicit bids from companies interested in creating textbooks, for students of all grades, that will be based on the standards.

Of the teachers and administrators who were surveyed about the pilot program, 72 percent said they were “very satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied” with the curriculum.

“I like balanced literacy, I do; I think that it works well, especially for children who are coming into school having been read to every single day,” said Katie Grady, principal of Public School 104 in Far Rockaway, Queens.

Her school began using elements of Core Knowledge in 2006, under Kathleen M. Cashin, a veteran superintendent who was an early adopter of Dr. Hirsch’s approach, with its heavy emphasis on basic knowledge.

“For my children, who are economically disadvantaged, they needed something more, and the Core Knowledge pilot had it,” Ms. Grady said. Of the nearly 700 students enrolled at her school last year, 88 percent met the city’s definition of poverty.

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