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To: Undisclosed recipients:
CC:
Date: Wed, 9/7/2011 3:53:46 PM
Subject: Foundation for Florida's Future: Key Reads: 9/7/11

Foundation for Florida's Future, Key Reads: 09/07/11

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NATIONAL NEWS

Urban Charters Outstrip Performance of Nonurban, Study Finds

Education Week

By: Sarah D. Sparks

September 7, 2011

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/09/07/03charter.h31.html?tkn=MVVFYIKQJT2x%2BqkvZdMDI9SjJASzyp%2BbESZv&cmp=clp-edweek>

A new Massachusetts study suggests that charter schools located in urban communities there significantly improved their students' mathematics and language arts performance on state assessments, while nonurban charter schools did not, and, in some cases, even appeared to hurt students academically.

The findings come in a [working paper](#) by researchers with the Cambridge, Mass.-based National Bureau of Economic Research. In the paper, released Aug. 22, the researchers trace the greater student academic growth in urban charter schools to the "no excuses" instructional approaches typical of urban charters in that state.

The study comes as a growing number of charters begin to move beyond city centers to compete in often better-performing school districts in suburbs and rural areas. According to the Washington-based National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, charters have been [spreading](#) in suburban and rural areas: From 1999-2000 to 2009-10, the number of suburban charters grew from 366 to 1,039, while the ranks of town and rural charters rose from 342 to 1,190. City charters grew from 833 to 2,692 during the same period.

"I think the charter movement is kind of coming of age," said Alice Johnson Cain, the NAPCS' vice president of external relations. "Parents want choices, and whether you are a parent in a low-income urban community or an affluent suburb, everyone wants the best possible education for their child."

"To me, part of what's really important here is we're taking an honest look at how charters are doing," she said. "With charters, the whole premise of them is they have more freedom, but with strings attached."

Charters' Mixed Record

The Massachusetts study may help explain the mixed record for charter schools' performance, which has been noted in previous studies by NAPCS researchers and other scholars. For example, a 2009 national [study](#) by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes, or CREDO, at Stanford University, found that while students at 17 percent of charter schools performed significantly better than peers at district schools, the rest showed no difference or even smaller learning gains at charters than at

district schools.

“There seems to be growing consensus around something that makes schools like KIPP unique,” said Robin J. Lake, the associate director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, referring to the Knowledge Is Power Program network of charter schools. “It certainly is related to extended learning time and discipline, but also to very high expectations for kids.”

“These urban schools are seeing this intensive urgency to get these kids who are way behind up to level, whereas the suburban schools are seeing their mission differently,” said Ms. Lake, whose Seattle-based center, affiliated with the University of Washington Bothell, oversees the National Charter School Research Project, which was not affiliated with Massachusetts charter study.

Tracking Progress

The researchers for the Massachusetts study—led by Joshua Angrist, an economics professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology—tracked nearly 10,000 secondary school students in the Bay State who participated in entrance lotteries at 24 urban and nonurban charters from 2001-02 to 2009-10, and then compared their scores on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, the state’s accountability test.

Massachusetts’ charter law so far has led to more charter schools in urban areas than in suburban or rural districts. While only 9 percent of the students, statewide, in a district can attend a charter school, that figure doubles to 18 percent for the lowest-performing 10 percent of districts, all of which are in urban areas.

The researchers found that students attending urban charter schools were more likely to be poor and from a racial minority than those at suburban charters, and that they had considerably lower MCAS scores before attending the charters. In both math and language arts, the urban students scored about 40 percent of a standard deviation below the state average for middle and high school, while students in the nonurban charters scored, on average, more than 20 percent of a standard deviation above the state average in those subjects and grades.

Yet once students enrolled in charter schools, that initial advantage for students in the suburban and rural charters vanished. Urban charters improved their students’ math and language arts scores from the bottom quarter of the class to the mean for all urban public school students. Black, poor, and very low-performing students showed the greatest improvement.

By contrast, while students attending nonurban charter schools started out with test scores slightly above the average of their peers attending regular public schools, their performance in high school was flat, and in middle school actually regressed to the average.

“The [urban] charters take a population which starts at a low baseline, ... so they don’t get above the suburban population, but they do get quite close, and that achievement is remarkable,” Mr. Angrist said.

“In the nonurban schools, there are students there that have relatively high scores with or without charter schools,” Mr. Angrist said, “but the charters add nothing to that and, in some cases, take a relatively high level of achievement and lower it, especially in middle schools. You wouldn’t think parents would welcome that.”

Jed F. Lippard, the president of the Massachusetts Charter Public Schools Association, said he did not find the study’s results surprising.

“The statistical analysis that the researchers did makes sense to me in terms of their salient conclusions,” he said. “It confirmed a lot of what I would have suspected the outcome of the study would have been.”

Both Mr. Lippard and Ms. Lake noted that charters that open in higher-performing suburban districts tend to focus on an instructional theme, such as performing arts or language immersion, rather than on a straight college-preparatory track with an intensive test focus.

“I would compare it to building a house,” said Mr. Lippard, who serves as head of school for Prospect Hill Academy Charter School. “The urban [charter] schools are working on building a foundation for the house, while the suburban schools are working on putting on sunrooms and skylights.”

‘No Excuses’ Approach

That difference in approach accounts for the gap in academic progress, Mr. Angrist said.

More than 70 percent of urban charter administrators said they fully or partially followed a “no excuses” charter model—popularized by national charter groups such as the San Francisco-based KIPP and the New York City-based Uncommon Schools—that focuses on intense math and reading instruction, extended learning time, discipline, and parent involvement. No nonurban charters identified with the approach.

Among the differences the study found:

- On average, urban charter school years lasted five days longer and their school days were 42 minutes longer than those at nonurban charters, with 35 more minutes a day spent on math and 40 minutes more on reading.

- More than 80 percent of urban charters required parents to sign a contract pledging their involvement with the school, compared with 46 percent of nonurban charters.
- Sixty-five percent of urban charters used a formal discipline and reward system, compared with 18 percent of their nonurban peers.

Urban charter schools were also more likely to pay for supplemental tutors and Saturday school for students.

Mr. Lippard agreed that his own Prospect Hill charter, which serves 1,150 kindergarten through 12th grade students just outside Boston, in Somerville and Cambridge, follows most of the strategies of the “no excuses” approach.

Yet in suburban charters where he taught before coming to Prospect Hill, Mr. Lippard said, “we could afford not to worry too much about MCAS because we knew the students were going to do pretty well on their own—but here in the urban schools, we can’t afford not to focus on MCAS.”

“Doing well on MCAS,” he added, “is a stamp our students need on their passports that will open doors for them to new opportunities, whereas those stamps are already on the passports of students in a lot of the suburban charters.”

Charter Reasoning

The situation may change as the number of charters in nonurban districts rises. More administrators and parents in regular public schools are fighting charters in wealthier and better-performing districts outside New York and Chicago, for example. In New Jersey, the Princeton International Academy Charter School filed suit in August against the Princeton Regional, South Brunswick Township, and West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional school boards for blocking its attempt to open a Mandarin-language dual-immersion charter school.

“These urban schools are seeing this intensive urgency to get these kids who are way behind up to level, whereas the suburban schools are seeing their mission differently,” Ms. Lake of the Center on Reinventing Public Education said. “I think it’s worth suburban and rural charters’ looking at the urban charters and saying, ‘Could we do with some of that urgency?’ We might have fallen into a bit of complacency. There is a lesson there, but it has to be dealt with carefully.”

This November, the center’s National Charter School Research Project plans to release results of a study of achievement of about 13,000 students attending schools run by 20 charter managers nationwide, comparing the effectiveness of different charter strategies.

“Any time you look at what makes a good school, it’s tempting to want to isolate one or two things, but we’re really finding that it’s a package of things that come together,” Ms. Lake said.

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Opinion: Don’t just blame teacher expectations

Washington Post

By: Jay Mathews

September 7, 2011

http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/class-struggle/post/dont-just-blame-teacher-expectations/2011/09/06/gIQAGi6J_blog.html

Oklahoma City educator, author and blogger (thisweekineducation.com) John Thompson offered me this piece on the complexity of expectations from every direction when trying to improve the atmosphere of urban high schools. It helps explain many of the unpleasant surprises of a new school year, and suggests how we might deal with them better than we do.

By John Thompson

In 1993, just before clocking in for my first day in a neighborhood school, I took two punches to the head while breaking up a gang-related fight. No consequences were assessed.

I still did not recognize the power of “rational expectations” in the way we run our urban schools until the next year when I taught freshmen. I had spent August camping with many of our incoming students. As always, the white country folk who ran the camp complimented the dignity of our poor black kids, saying that they showed more responsibility than middle-class campers. So, it was a double jolt to witness the horrible behavior of so many of the same kids as they entered high school. Clearly, there was an expectation that teens, who knew how to act properly at church or on the job, would often start running wild as soon as they stepped into a school building.

Our administrators understood the importance of getting off to a good start, but about half of the time circumstances beyond their control created anarchy. And that year we faced a triple whammy due to asbestos removal, teacher cutbacks, and temperatures in excess of 100 degrees in classrooms.

One former camper/basketball buddy took advantage of the confusion to arrive late for class and then talk while I was talking.

When I called my student on it, he started sucking his thumb.

A couple of weeks later, I overheard some students who had just learned that a teacher had finally arrived for their class. The freshmen's initial reaction was to stop cutting class, but an older kid said, "No!" Demonstrating the essence of rational expectations, the student explained that then the teacher would recognize them, and "you'll have to go from then on."

When I broke up a football game, involving dozens of students, in the hall during class, the assistant principal did not appreciate it. The award-winning teacher who should have been teaching them had been called to the other side of the building to address a more pressing crisis.

Previously, the school had been effective in pushing drug dealers to the edges of the property, but a gang-banger took control of the teacherless room next to mine. When I started to deal with the situation, the assistant principal was adamant that that was none of my business.

That principal coined the mantra of our district's administrators. Their job was to "keep the plate spinning until June."

We should reject the administrator's philosophy, but her sincerity and courage were unchallenged. When the assistant principal faced down a student with a loaded gun, she did not know that it lacked a firing pin.

Around that time, data-driven "reformers" started to claim that "low expectations" by teachers explained the achievement gap. In reality, those expectations were just a part of a complex web of rational expectations by all stakeholders. The mentality of just "keep the plate spinning" was a rational expectation of a century of underfunding as well as generations of Jim Crow.

In the previous decade, "Supply Side Economics" had wiped out our city's industrial jobs as the banking system's collapse and the Reagan Administration's HUD scandal destroyed our neighborhoods, creating an ideal environment for the crack epidemic. Education funding before our 1990 tax increase was \$3,202 per student. The old timers said that the 1970s had been worse as "white flight" and racial violence followed desegregation.

Neither has the last decade been a picnic for urban educators and families. "Reformers," however, are still missing the point. Low expectations by educators are just one piece of the problem. The challenges brought from home are not the only reasons why schools bring out so much of the worst in everyone. It is the legacy of decade after decade of complex and overwhelming social problems that have created low, but rational, expectations for low-income schools. The culture of powerlessness that cripples today's neighborhood schools must be seen in the context of generations of disrespect for urban education.

We cannot intimidate people into having higher expectations. The rational path to reform requires the empowering of the adults and students in our schools. And I do not see why such an approach would be so frightening. Despite all of the awful things I have seen, rarely have I seen students or educators who did not want to make themselves better.

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FLORIDA NEWS

Florida: Pasco schools may embrace cell phones, laptops, iPods

St. Petersburg Times

By: Jeffrey Solocheck

September 7, 2011

<http://www.tampabay.com/news/education/k12/pasco-schools-may-embrace-student-phones-laptops/1190035#comments>

The days of banning cell phones at Pasco schools may be coming to an end.

"We need to get off that dinosaur," superintendent Heather Fiorentino told the School Board on Tuesday during a workshop on classroom technology.

It's a matter of dollars and sense.

Schools must increase accessibility to computers and other digital devices to give students better opportunities to learn using the tools that are available in most businesses, not to mention in their homes, Fiorentino said.

Yet the district has only limited resources to meet such demands.

"We need to be able to harness the power of student-owned devices," said Wendy Spriggs, district director of instructional media services. Telling students to power down when they arrive at school — often the only place they have to turn off — "makes school feel much more irrelevant to them," she added.

Many schools already have headed down that path, allowing students to use their own laptops, smart phones and computer tablets for classroom research and projects. School Board members raised concerns about the trend.

"All that sounds really good where it's been utilized for learning. But I don't hear any of those stories," vice chairman Allen

Altman said.

He has heard teachers complaining that students get calls from parents and send text messages to classmates during class, causing disruptions. What models exist, Altman asked, to allow the use of student-owned devices for learning without allowing them to become a distraction?

"It is a struggle," Spriggs acknowledged. "It really becomes a behavior issue at that point."

Fiorentino said the schools with clear usage guidelines have very few issues with inappropriate texting and the like, because the students do not want to lose the privilege. The schools that have outlawed all cell phone use have many more problems, she said.

"We have to deal with the behavior of using it inappropriately," Spriggs said.

But that should not mean banning phones, iPods and other equipment, board member Cynthia Armstrong added. She likened the idea to telling kids they cannot bring paper and pencils to school because they might pass notes.

"It is here," board member Alison Crumbley said in agreement. "We have to deal with it."

Spriggs said it would fall to the district to ensure proper "digital citizenship" of students. That's just one of many things the district must accomplish as it moves ahead with initiatives to expand the availability of technology in the schools, she said.

Infrastructure needs remain large, she noted.

The district has yet to reach its goal of having one computer for every three students, for instance. After a thorough review, which included upgrading memory on nearly 1,000 machines, the district's middle and high schools have attained a 4 to 1 ratio.

Even that has not been good enough, assistant superintendent Ruth Reilly said, as schools commandeered career and technical program computers for testing, interrupting daily instruction.

At the elementary level, some schools were at 90 to 1, while others had many more modern computers, said John Simon, director of information services. The district has moved toward an overall average of 6.5 students per computer, with a plan to make incremental improvements annually, he said.

The district continues to strive to bring more interactive technology into the classrooms, using school improvement plans as a guide. Teacher training on best uses remains a work in progress, too.

Board chairwoman Joanne Hurley said the staff's report on technology made clear the district's needs. Now it's time for the board to consider the accompanying policy and budget implications.

"I suspect they're huge," Hurley said.

Some questions have emerged nationally about whether increased technology in the classroom, however engaging, translates into improved academic performance. Board members expect to continue this conversation at a workshop later this month.

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Florida: Three proposed charter schools seek approval

St. Augustine Record

By: Marcia Lane

September 6, 2011

http://staugustine.com/news/local-news/2011-09-06/three-proposed-charter-schools-seek-approval#.TmeRFGoj_VY

Finance, facilities and curriculum for three proposed charter schools all came under scrutiny by the St. Johns County School Board during a workshop Tuesday.

"Obviously we want (the charter schools) to be as successful as we are. We have a responsibility to vet them ... carefully," said Superintendent Joe Joyner.

All three schools want to open for the 2012-13 school year.

School boards must approve or deny charter school proposals using a 19-item list of standards ranging from curriculum to transportation, funding to school lunches.

"The application process is an eye-opening experience. St. Paul's School for Excellence and the St. Augustine Public Montessori School have not been through the process before. When you're having to do revenue projections, work sheets and budgets, it is very overwhelming," said Tim Forson, the associate superintendent who is overseeing the process.

The third school, PRIDE, is an off-shoot of ABLE School Inc., an established charter school. Last year, school officials withdrew

a proposal for an elementary charter school.

Charter schools and other alternatives to traditional public schools have become the darlings of politicians including Florida legislators.

This year, for instance, the state's 350 charter schools got all of the \$55 million in Public Educational Capital Outlay (PECO) funds for construction and repairs. The state's 3,000 traditional public schools got nothing. It's a trend that's been building since 1998 when legislators first began giving charter schools a piece of the PECO pie.

Board member Carla Wright several times voiced her opposition to using taxpayer money on fixing up or building facilities that ultimately could end up belonging to the landlord.

Legislation passed in Florida this year made it easier for new charter schools to open and for existing charter schools, meeting certain standards, to expand. Charter schools have boomed in South Florida.

New charter schools are eligible to compete for state funding. That means if the three are approved, they'll find themselves in competition with other start-up charter schools for funding.

ABLE plans elementary

Scott Beebe, head of the ABLE charter school and hoping to open a charter school at the elementary level, said last year that only about 50 percent of those who applied received funding.

When Joyner asked why he didn't just incorporate the grade school into his fifth-eighth grade academy, Beebe said it was because money was only available for new start-ups.

Charters are managed by independent governing boards and as such aren't bound by many of the requirements elected school boards face. However, students are held accountable and do have to take the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. Schools also receive grades. Two failing grades in a row and the local school board can close a school. Teachers will also be held accountable under new laws that use student test scores and evaluations.

Questions for Montessori

In order to stay in business, the schools have to stay in the black. Each of the three proposed charters is struggling with funding models, looking at fund raising and grants to help get their schools off the ground.

"We know how difficult funding is. ... You're coming out of the gate in very difficult times," board chairman Bill Fehling told Montessori advocate Jean McDowell as he looked over a proposed budget for that school.

Students will have to meet certain standards and that can cause problems when the standards conflict with the philosophies of charters. Montessori is based on a teaching philosophy that includes three-year sequences. District officials said that could lead to problems with measuring how students are doing.

Church, school separation

For St. Paul's School of Excellence, board members reminded the Rev. Ron Rawls that there would need to be a separation of the church from the school. Rawls said it wouldn't be a problem since a major focus of the school is to help students and parents appreciate the importance of education.

"We want to be in a position to assure our children are not starting out behind," Rawls said.

District officials had the most questions for ABLE school's Beebe, the only one with a track record. The school earned an "A" three years ago, then dropped to a C and was back up to an A this year. Officials also went over individual student scores in math and science.

Several board members were concerned about how students in the new school, which would focus on the arts, would measure up in science and math. They also wanted some assurance the school would hire teachers certified in art and music, since that was not included in the application.

Beebe finally told them that if the school had not gotten a C, the new rules from the legislature would have meant he could have opened his school without ever coming to the school board plus gotten a 15-year renewal.

"We wouldn't even be having this conversation," he said.

Joyner said he wasn't "pro charter or anti charter" but did want to see children put first.

"Just because the legislature is for something doesn't make it right," Joyner added.

Board member Bill Mignon had the final word. Beebe had left, but Mignon said the reason for the questions to all the charter schools boiled down to "what if it doesn't succeed ... we're the ones who have to clean up."

ST. AUGUSTINE PUBLIC MONTESSORI SCHOOL

Featuring Montessori educational program

Classes run in 3-year cycles

Program would start out with first-third grade (including couple of fourth graders)

Two certified teachers for class of 26/two classes

Plan calls for building up to a fourth-sixth grade class

Looking for property

Challenge: The curriculum piece. Current standards and assessments portions presented don't match well with requirements

ST. PAUL'S SCHOOL OF EXCELLENCE

Intended as a model school combining learning and getting parents and guardians to buy into building family involvement and support to help students.

Would be separate from St. Paul AME Church although located on church-owned property. Rev. Ron Rawls as ex-officio member of school governing board

Starting out with kindergarten-second grade classes.

Two classes per grade level

Eventually would offer classes through sixth grade

Would lease building from St. Paul AME

Challenge: Work through refining budget building.

PEACE SCHOOL

(PREPARATORY EDUCATION IN ARTISTIC AND CREATIVE EXPRESSION)

School organizers are the same as for Able School Inc. (The Academy of Business and Leadership) which is for fifth-eighth grades

PEACE would be a separate school from ABLE

School would start with fourth grade and build down to Kindergarten

Two classes per grade, 18 per class

Emphasis on the arts. ABLE has a leadership/business theme; PEACE would have an arts theme

Could start out at the ABLE school location or rent other property

Challenge: School board is concerned about the depth of curriculum and whether it will lead to higher performances.

WHAT'S NEXT

The St. Johns County School Board will vote Sept. 13 on whether or not to grant requests for three charter schools. If requested, an extension could be granted.

School proponents have until Thursday afternoon to offer additional information or make changes in their proposals that the board heard during a Tuesday workshop.

If a charter school application is rejected, proponents can appeal the decision to the Florida Department of Education.

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Florida: FCAT panels to set standards for new FCAT 2.0, algebra exams

Orlando Sentinel

By: Leslie Postal

September 6, 2011

http://blogs.orlandosentinel.com/news_education_edblog/2011/09/fcat-panels-to-set-standards-for-new-fcat-2-0-algebra-

[exams.html?](#)

[utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+SentinelSchoolZone+%28Sentinel+School+Zone%29](#)

Now that Florida has rolled out its new FCAT — version 2.0 — and its new standardized algebra exam, it's time to decide how to plot scores from those tests on the five-level FCAT scoring chart. The algebra end-of-course exam, which debuted last spring, will be graded like FCAT.

But on the new tests, what scores should be considered grade level (3), what should be viewed as excellent (5) and what should be a sign students are really struggling with most of the material (1)?

A panel of educators and a second panel of administrators and “business and organization leaders” will meet this month to figure it all out.

The “standard-setting committee” meets first. Its members — all experienced educators, DOE says — will recommend so-called cut scores. That means they'll decide what mark separates, say, a level 2 score from a level 3 score. They'll do that, DOE says, based on their experience teaching Florida's academic standards and their review of test-score data.

The second committee — dubbed the “reactor panel” — will then review that first panel's work and recommend whether it is appropriate. The “reactor panel” includes superintendents from Orange, Volusia and Seminole school districts as well as leaders of statewide business groups (the Florida Chamber of Commerce) and education organizations (the Florida PTA and Step Up for Children, which gives out state-financed scholarships to low-income students).

The work of both will be presented to the State Board of Education, which has to formally set the new scores. The new scores will be in place for the FCAT and algebra exams taken this spring.

The state used a similar process when it set achievement levels — and then passing scores — for FCAT a decade ago.

It's a bureaucratic process but one with serious and personal consequences for many students. The tougher the standard, the more students there are who likely will fall below “grade level.” Depending on their age, that could mean they have to repeat a grade, take remedial classes and/or retake an exam needed to earn a diploma.

Folks I interviewed back in 2000 said they wrestled with how to set a meaningful standard that did the raise-the-bar thing everyone wanted — but wasn't so tough that it meant thousands and thousands of students couldn't earn diplomas. My guess is they'll be similar conversations this time around.

The state has already decided that the passing score on the 10th-grade FCAT reading exam has to be a grade-level mark. Students had been able to pass with a high level 2 — but no more. This year's 10th graders must earn a level 3 to pass FCAT.

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Florida E-Learning Mandate Puts Financial Strain on Districts

Education Week

By: Marc Valero

September 6, 2011

http://www.edweek.org/dd/articles/2011/09/06/03mct_flonline.h31.html

A new state law that requires Florida high school students to take a class online is causing cash-strapped school districts to spend millions on new computers.

The new law requires incoming freshman, beginning this school year, to take at least one course online prior to graduation.

School districts say that to meet this new requirement they will have to spend money on new computer labs so that students who do not have access to the Internet at home will be able to take online courses.

"Overall, I don't think it is a bad idea for students because as they go forward there is a lot of online learning that is going to be expected of them," said Highlands County School Board Member J. Ned Hancock.

"Whether it is at the college level or the employment level, it seems like there are more and more Webinars and different continuing education done over the Internet and are computer-based."

That part of it is good; the bad part is the state hasn't done anything to help local districts purchase more computers, he said.

Some students are going to find it hard to fit everything—such as homework or a missed assignment—that is required into one class period just in the computer lab, Hancock said.

How do you make that up if you don't have access to a computer? he asked.

A significant amount of the money the district is looking to get from the federal Race to the Top grant is slated for technology.

But the district has not done everything to qualify for it yet, he said.

"If that happens to not work out, then we are going to be in that much worse position," Hancock said.

The Legislature had good intentions when it stipulated the online requirement, he said.

But with the current funding structure, now is not a good time to implement some of these programs in such a short time frame, Hancock said.

Avon Park High freshmen guidance counselor Ashley Ridenour said a letter has been sent to all freshmen about the new requirement.

"We want to make them aware of it as soon as possible, so they can go ahead and get it out of the way, so they don't have to worry about it in their senior year," she said.

There are concerns about whether some students will be good online learners, but the state is trying to prepare students for college where they will most likely have some online courses, Ridenour said.

During tutoring sessions after school on Wednesdays and from 8 a.m. to noon Saturdays, students will have the Internet available to them so they can do their virtual class and also receive help from the tutors, she said.

Highlands County is not alone with concerns about computers and lab space.

Most schools already have computer labs, said Chris McGuire, principal of Broward Virtual School.

But the new law could force districts to buy additional computers and set up more labs for students who can only take an online class while on campus.

Pam McAuley, manager of instructional programs at the Hillsborough County School District, said the new requirement will place a burden on already crowded computer lab space.

"As we stand right now, there are no funds to add more computers or lab space," McAuley said.

"We are going to have to get creative site by site and see what kind of lab space they have."

This shift from requiring districts to offer online courses as an option, to mandating that students take an online course prior to graduation, is a huge policy change, educators say.

In Broward County, which educators say offers one of the best virtual education programs in the state, one study reported that at most, only 20 percent of high school seniors graduate having taken an online course.

Critics of online education say it makes cheating on assignments and tests easier, and for some students, the material is more difficult to understand when delivered via the Web.

The issue has caught the attention of the American Civil Liberties Union, which said Thursday it is calling on school districts to ensure that students who do not have Internet access at home aren't at a disadvantage when it comes to being able to take online courses.

"We are concerned about issues of access," said ACLU spokesman Baylor Johnson.

"There is a digital divide in this country and Internet access is limited by economic means."

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STATE NEWS

Pittsburgh non-profit seeking applicants for new merit-based scholarship program

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

By: Staff

September 6, 2011

<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/11249/1172730-298.stm>

Luminari, a Pittsburgh-based non-profit, has announced a merit-based scholarship program for area students who will be in grades 7 through 11 during the 2011-2012 academic school year.

Luminari will select up to eight area schools to participate in the award competition with a Sept. 30 deadline for schools to contact the program. Award winners from each school will receive a scholarship for an all-expenses-paid admission to Luminari's

I Want to be an Ambassador! camp, a scholarship with a value of over \$1,200.

The I Want to be an Ambassador! camp will be held next summer from June 19 -- June 27, 2012, marking the third time this camp will be offered. The seven-day experience designed to teach young people the art and skills of diplomacy and ways to start using those skills immediately to solve problems in their communities and around the world. Camp includes a week of activities both in Pittsburgh and in Washington, D.C., where campers interact with diplomats on Embassy Row.

"We have two goals for the Luminari Award. One is to reward students for their noteworthy personal and academic qualities," said Luminari founder and President Hilda Pang Fu. "The second goal is to honor the dynamic schools and inspiring teachers who support these students."

To qualify, schools must commit to opening the competition to all eligible students; and gather at least six successfully completed applications from students in their district. Luminari Award winners will be announced in mid-February 2012.

For complete information about the Luminari Award guidelines to participate, interested schools should contact Luminari no later than September 30, 2011. Districts can contact Jacqueline McWilliams at 412.877.1888 or at jaq.mcw@gmail.com.

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Iowa: Education reform plan will call for exit exams, teacher pay tiers

Des Moines Register

By: Sheena Dooley

September 7, 2011

<http://www.desmoinesregister.com/article/20110907/NEWS/309070070/1004/NEWS02/Education-reform-plan-will-call-exit-exams-teacher-pay-tiers>

Iowa education leaders Tuesday unveiled a framework for overhauling the state's education system that includes implementing high school exit exams, doing away with a century-old teacher pay system and expanding charter schools.

Also included is the development of assessments that measure whether students have mastered specific subjects and the creation of an innovation fund to provide districts with the money to try new things in the classroom. Additionally, Iowa would require ninth-graders to take an international academic exam every three years and require 11th-graders to take the ACT college entrance exam.

"The competition is now worldwide," said Jason Glass, Iowa Department of Education director. "We have to up our game. Shouldn't schools in Iowa be among the highest performing in the world? The only morally acceptable answer to that is 'yes.'"

"When you are looking at reform on this scale, yes, things go wrong. We are going to make mistakes, but it will be incumbent upon Iowa and the people here to learn, adapt and get better," he added.

Glass and Linda Fandel, Gov. Terry Branstad's special assistant for education, offered the first glimpse into Branstad's blueprint for reform, which will be unveiled Oct. 3. Officials, until now, have said only that their efforts would focus on three areas: setting clear and rigorous standards with fair measures for results, improving principal and teacher effectiveness, and increasing innovation in the classroom.

Specifically, the plans include:

Doing away with the current teacher pay system that bases salaries on experience and college credits earned. Instead, the state would adopt a four-tiered system that would include apprentice, career, mentor and master teachers. Starting salaries for apprentice teachers would be around \$40,000. Teachers would receive large bumps in pay each time they advanced to a different tier, with the maximum earnings around \$80,000, Glass said. The state would grandfather in the system and allow veteran teachers to decide whether they want to opt in.

Changing teacher tenure to make it easier for districts to get rid of ineffective teachers. Officials also want to do away with "last in, first out" procedures, based solely on laying off teachers with the least amount of seniority. Instead, district officials when considering layoffs would recognize teacher credentials and the needs of individual schools.

Continuing to refine the Iowa Core, which outlines expectations for what students should know at each grade level. Officials would develop a test that better reflects whether students are meeting those expectations.

Expanding the presence of charter schools. Officials continue to explore whether to allow private companies to run the charters. Operators would have to demonstrate a need for the school and its feasibility, Glass said. If they failed to meet state expectations, they would be closed.

Requiring all 11th-graders to take the ACT college entrance exam. Also, students would have to take a high school exit exam. It has not been determined whether students would have to pass it in order to graduate, Glass said. Schools would start giving the exam to 10th-graders in hopes of catching those who are struggling early and providing them with extra help before they graduate, he said.

No details given on paying for plan

Glass and Fandel did not detail planned improvements to teacher preparation programs and teacher evaluations. They also didn't discuss how the state would pay for the proposed changes.

State lawmakers will most likely take up the final recommendations during the next legislative session. They have said there is momentum for change, but both parties will have to make concessions for the proposals to move forward. It's unclear how much the reforms will cost.

At stake is the state's ability to produce the educated and highly skilled workers needed to attract and keep businesses that will bolster its economy. Without a qualified work force, Iowa faces losing businesses to other states and nations, leaders have said.

State officials will meet with representatives from the Iowa Association of School Boards, Iowa State Education Association, School Administrators of Iowa, lawmakers and business leaders today to further discuss the proposals. They also plan to travel the state to gain input from educators and community members, Glass said.

Tom Downs, executive director of the Iowa school boards association, said state leaders had already discussed the reform efforts laid out Tuesday with state education groups. The current framework doesn't concern him, although he said he has yet to see the details. Also, the state might meet resistance from educators in regard to proposals such as those to change teacher tenure, he said.

"We aren't improving as rapidly as some of our competitors from a state-to-state perspective and, certainly, a global perspective," Downs said. "In Iowa, you have to listen to everyone and bring them all on board. It takes board members, administrators, teachers and parents to work together."

Branstad made restoring Iowa's No. 1 standing in education his top priority when he took office earlier this year. He has since traveled the state, meeting with residents and educators to garner input. Education experts from around the country gathered in Des Moines in July for a summit meant to make the case for and spark conversation about a statewide overhaul.

Iowa has slipped in recent years from topping the nation in education. In 2009, 13 states scored significantly higher than Iowa in fourth-grade reading, while 15 outperformed it in eighth-grade math.

Glass: Districts need flexibility

Glass said he wants to give districts more flexibility to try new things and will ask lawmakers to provide the state education department with the authority to grant districts leeway. That's something that appeals to leaders of the Des Moines school district.

Nancy Sebring, Des Moines' superintendent, said her district has repeatedly asked the state for more flexibility to try new things in return for greater accountability. They haven't been allowed to move forward with their ideas that include longer school days or school years because of state law, she said.

"We need more influence over the inputs if we are held accountable for the outputs," Sebring said.

Officials with the Iowa State Education Association are waiting for more details before saying whether they support the state's plan, said Mary Jane Cobb, executive director of the group.

"You all have as many questions about this as we have had," she said. "The devil is in the details of what this looks like and how it impacts teachers and impacts classrooms."

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Nebraska Education Department unveils new student tool

Associated Press

By: Staff

September 7, 2011

<http://www.nebraska.tv/story/15407318/neb-education-department-unveils-new-student-tool>

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) - The Nebraska Department of Education has unveiled a new parent- and student-friendly tool to gauge reading and math standards.

Student-Friendly Standards is a grade-by-grade resource for use in the home or classroom. State language arts consultant Tricia Parker says Student-Friendly Standards has been developed to help students and parents better understand what teachers expect and why students are expected to do certain activities.

The online tool is available in several formats as well as brochures that may be printed from the Nebraska Department of Education's website.

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