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## Foundation for Florida's Future, Key Reads: 9/6/11

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## NATIONAL NEWS

### **Congress Returns to Face ESEA, Ed. Funding Issues**

Education Week

By: Alyson Klein

September 6, 2011

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/09/06/03congress.h31.html?tkn=LURFvcHum8WuEDUq7fPmfdJvFRqCqtm94j2t&cmp=clp-edweek>

Congress returns from its summer recess this week with a full plate of unfinished business on the future of K-12 spending and policy—a tall order in Washington's polarized political climate.

Federal lawmakers, who have already had two protracted battles this year over budget issues, must finish the appropriations bills for fiscal 2012. The budget process is complicated by the work of a new panel created as part of a deal to raise the federal debt ceiling and charged with finding ways to significantly cut the deficit over the next decade.

The panel's recommendations, due in November, could have a dramatic impact on discretionary federal spending, including for education.

Lawmakers are also continuing to ponder reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, although the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate are taking far different approaches to the long-stalled renewal, which few observers expect to be completed this year.

At the same time, the Obama administration is preparing to offer states waivers of parts of the current version of the law—the No Child Left Behind Act—if they are willing to embrace reform priorities expected to be outlined later this month.

The upcoming spending battles have broad implications for the waiver plan and for ESEA reauthorization in general, said Kate Tromble, the director of government relations for the Education Trust, a Washington-based advocacy group for disadvantaged and minority students.

“What happens with the funding is going to be the biggest thing to watch this fall,” she said. Creating “a new generation” of the NCLB law will “require some money. It's difficult to figure out how you continue moving forward” on education redesign if there are significant cuts, she added.

And advocates are keeping a close eye on President Barack Obama's scheduled Sept. 8 address to Congress, in which he is expected to outline his plan for jump-starting the nation's sluggish economy and putting more Americans back to work. Some are pressing for new money for K-12 schools, including funds to prevent further teacher layoffs and to revamp aging school facilities.

#### *'Supercommittee'*

The deficit-reduction panel, nicknamed the “supercommittee,” was created this summer as part of a compromise between President Obama and congressional leaders on raising the debt ceiling.

It is made up of 12 lawmakers—three Democrats and three Republicans from each chamber—and is tasked with drafting legislation to carve at least \$1.2 trillion out of the budget deficit over the next 10 years.

Members of the panel have until Nov. 23 to come up with a plan. Their colleagues can then pass it or reject it, without the opportunity to make changes.

The committee has broad authority and is permitted to suggest specific spending levels for domestic programs, including education. But few expect the panel will take that route. Instead, committee members are more likely to consider education in the context of overall domestic, discretionary spending, which also includes many health, jobs, and environmental programs. Regardless, education proponents are watching the panel's work closely. If the committee can't reach agreement—or if Congress rejects its plan—deep cuts kick in that would affect almost every federal program.

The Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, a research organization in Washington, is predicting an across-the-board cut of 9 percent for affected programs in nondefense agencies—including the U.S. Department of Education—if the committee doesn't come up with a viable alternative.

That would amount to roughly a \$4 billion slice out of the Education Department's nearly \$70 billion budget, according to the Committee for Education Funding, a Washington-based lobbying coalition.

"The biggest threat to education is if the [supercommittee] doesn't do what it's supposed to do," said Joel Packer, the executive director of the CEF.

### *Budget Battles*

Meanwhile, advocates also are keeping a wary eye on fiscal 2012 appropriations legislation. Mr. Obama asked for \$77.4 billion for education, a 10.7 percent increase, in part to help cover the rising cost of Pell Grants, which help low-income students pay for college.

But supporters agree that the overall increase is unlikely to materialize.

"At best, we will wind up with a freeze," Mr. Packer said. "There will probably be cuts to some programs."

What would be particularly vulnerable are programs that the president slated for consolidation in his budget request for fiscal 2012, which begins Oct. 1. Many long-standing Education Department programs, such as state grants for educational technology, were scrapped after a budget standoff earlier this year that nearly resulted in a government shutdown.

But some programs that House Republicans and the Obama administration sought to eliminate skated by, including the \$52 million Elementary and Secondary School Counseling program.

Now, champions of those programs are worried their luck may not hold.

For instance, the American School Counselors Association is informing lawmakers about the impact the counseling program has in their districts, said Amanda Fitzgerald, the organization's director of public policy.

Even some of the president's priorities are on shaky ground. The high-profile Race to the Top and Investing in Innovation grant programs, originally part of the 2009 federal economic-stimulus program, received small increases in fiscal 2011. But those programs may be susceptible this year, as lawmakers seek to significantly reduce spending.

To get new money for those programs last year, administration officials likely made it clear to Congress that they were his highest priority, said Jennifer Cohen, a senior policy analyst for the Federal Education Budget Project at the New America Foundation, a Washington think tank.

"It's hard to say whether the president is going to put all his weight behind the same program two years in a row," she said.

### *Job Creation*

The first part of what could be another spending showdown could begin this week, when President Obama is expected to unveil his plan for spurring job creation.

School construction proponents are urging the administration to close certain tax loopholes and funnel the savings to school maintenance and repair. The 21st Century Schools Fund, a research and advocacy organization in Washington that promotes high-quality facilities, would like to see Mr. Obama put \$50 billion toward upgrading schools.

"There is an enormous backlog" of construction projects, said Mary Filardo, the group's executive director. "At the same time, we have skilled trades people out of work in communities across the United States."

Mr. Obama gave those advocates reason to be optimistic during an Aug. 30 interview on "The Tom Joyner Morning Show," a nationally syndicated radio program.

"We've got a lot of stuff that needs to get done," he said. "There are schools all across the country that right now you could put people to work fixing up."

The president even hinted at the possibility of federal funding to stave off further teacher-job cuts.

"We've got the capacity right now to help local school districts make sure that they're not laying off more teachers," Mr. Obama said. "We haven't been as aggressive as we need to, both at the state and federal level."

Still, any school construction proposal is likely to face significant hurdles, particularly among Republicans who believe school facilities should be a local expenditure.

In fact, school construction funding was a major sticking point when a Democratic-controlled Congress negotiated the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the 2009 stimulus law that provided some \$100 billion for education.

The legislation's sponsors initially sought to include a new school construction grant program in the bill, but it was jettisoned to garner support from moderate Democrats and Republicans. Now, with the GOP in control of the House, a school construction program would face even longer political odds.

Finding money to stave off layoffs could also be an uphill battle. The administration had a tough time securing \$10 billion for the Education Jobs Fund in the summer of 2010, also at a time when both chambers of Congress were in Democratic hands.

### *ESEA Stalled*

The House, meanwhile, is likely to consider at least three bills this fall aimed at reworking targeted pieces of the ESEA, all of which have already gotten a stamp of approval from the House Education and the Workforce Committee.

But only one of the measures—a bill to bolster charter schools—has support from lawmakers on both sides of the aisle. The other two pieces of legislation caused division in the committee and were approved along strict party lines.

One of those measures would eliminate more than 40 programs in the Education Department. Many of them have been on the books for years, but haven't received federal money recently, such as the Star Schools Distance Learning program. But others,

such as the \$46 million Teaching American History initiative, are still operating. Another, more controversial measure, which passed out of the education committee on a party-line vote in July, would offer districts expanded flexibility in using federal dollars. The bill would permit districts to shift money aimed at particular populations of students, such as children in poverty, and direct it to other activities or groups of students, such as those in special education.

Republicans argue the measure would make it easier for districts and states to direct federal money where it is needed most, while Democrats maintain that it would allow districts to ignore poor and minority children.

Although all three bills would make important changes to federal K-12 policy, none gets at the accountability and teacher-quality issues at the heart of the NCLB law. Rep. John Kline, R-Minn., the chairman of the House education committee, is planning to introduce a pair of new ESEA-related bills this fall that would address such issues.

On the Senate side, Sens. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, the chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, and Michael B. Enzi, R-Wyo., its ranking member, have been meeting regularly to consider comprehensive legislation.

Mr. Harkin initially set a goal of considering an ESEA reauthorization bill in committee last spring. But lawmakers have struggled to reach agreement on key issues, including accountability and the scope of the federal role in K-12 education.

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## Many US schools adding iPads, trimming textbooks

Associated Press

By: Stephanie Reitz

September 3, 2011

<http://news.yahoo.com/many-us-schools-adding-ipads-trimming-textbooks-160839908.html>

HARTFORD, Conn. (AP) — For incoming freshmen at western Connecticut's suburban Brookfield High School, hefting a backpack weighed down with textbooks is about to give way to tapping out notes and flipping electronic pages on a glossy iPad tablet computer.

A few hours away, every student at Burlington High School near Boston will also start the year with new school-issued iPads, each loaded with electronic textbooks and other online resources in place of traditional bulky texts.

While iPads have rocketed to popularity on many college campuses since Apple Inc. introduced the device in spring 2010, many public secondary schools this fall will move away from textbooks in favor of the lightweight tablet computers.

Apple officials say they know of more than 600 districts that have launched what are called "one-to-one" programs, in which at least one classroom of students is getting iPads for each student to use throughout the school day.

Nearly two-thirds of them have begun since July, according to Apple.

New programs are being announced on a regular basis, too. As recently as Wednesday, Kentucky's education commissioner and the superintendent of schools in Woodford County, Ky., said that Woodford County High will become the state's first public high school to give each of its 1,250 students an iPad.

At Burlington High in suburban Boston, principal Patrick Larkin calls the \$500 iPads a better long-term investment than textbooks, though he said the school will still use traditional texts in some courses if suitable electronic programs aren't yet available.

"I don't want to generalize because I don't want to insult people who are working hard to make those resources," Larkin said of textbooks, "but they're pretty much outdated the minute they're printed and certainly by the time they're delivered. The bottom line is that the iPads will give our kids a chance to use much more relevant materials."

The trend has not been limited to wealthy suburban districts. New York City, Chicago and many other urban districts also are buying large numbers of iPads.

The iPads generally cost districts between \$500 and \$600, depending on what accessories and service plans are purchased.

By comparison, Brookfield High in Connecticut estimates it spends at least that much yearly on every student's textbooks, not including graphing calculators, dictionaries and other accessories they can get on the iPads.

Educators say the sleek, flat tablet computers offer a variety of benefits.

They include interactive programs to demonstrate problem-solving in math, scratchpad features for note-taking and bookmarking, the ability to immediately send quizzes and homework to teachers, and the chance to view videos or tutorials on everything from important historical events to learning foreign languages.

They're especially popular in special education services, for children with autism spectrum disorders and learning disabilities, and for those who learn best when something is explained with visual images, not just through talking.

Some advocates also say the interactive nature of learning on an iPad comes naturally to many of today's students, who've grown up with electronic devices as part of their everyday world.

But for all of the excitement surrounding the growth of iPads in public secondary schools, some experts watching the trend warn that the districts need to ensure they can support the wireless infrastructure, repairs and other costs that accompany a switch to such a tech-heavy approach.

And even with the most modern device in hand, students still need the basics of a solid curriculum and skilled teachers.

"There's a saying that the music is not in the piano and, in the same way, the learning is not in the device," said Mark Warschauer, an education and informatics professor at the University of California-Irvine whose specialties include research on the intersection of technology and education.

"I don't want to oversell these things or present the idea that these devices are miraculous, but they have some benefits and that's why so many people outside of schools are using them so much," he said.

One such iPad devotee is 15-year-old Christian Woods, who starts his sophomore year at Burlington, Mass., High School on a special student support team to help about 1,000 other teens adjust to their new tablets.

"I think people will like it. I really don't know anybody in high school that wouldn't want to get an iPad," he said. "We're always using technology at home, then when you're at school it's textbooks, so it's a good way to put all of that together."

Districts are varied in their policies on how they police students' use.

Many have filtering programs to keep students off websites that have not been pre-approved, and some require the students to turn in the iPads during vacation breaks and at the end of the school year. Others hold the reins a little more loosely.

"If we truly consider this a learning device, we don't want to take it away and say, 'Leaning stops in the summertime.' " said Larkin, the Burlington principal.

And the nation's domestic textbook publishing industry, accounting for \$5.5 billion in yearly sales to secondary schools, is taking notice of the trend with its own shift in a competitive race toward developing curriculum specifically for iPads.

At Boston-based Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, for instance, programmers scrambled to create an iPad-specific secondary school program starting almost as soon as Apple unveiled the tablet in spring 2010.

The publisher's HMH Fuse algebra program, which became available at the start of the 2010 school year, was among the first and is a top seller to districts. Another algebra program and a geometry offering are coming out now.

The HMH Fuse online app is free and gives users an idea of how it works, and the content can be downloaded for \$60. By comparison, the publisher's 950-page algebra text on which it was based is almost \$73 per copy, and doesn't include the graphing calculators, interactive videos and other features.

For a school that would buy 300 of the textbooks for its freshman class, for instance, the savings from using the online version would be almost \$4,000.

Jay Diskey, executive director of the Association of American Publishers' schools division, said all of the major textbook publishers are moving toward electronic offerings, but at least in the short term, traditional bound textbooks are here to stay.

"I think one of the real key questions that will be answered over the next several years is what sort of things work best in print for students and what sort of things work best digitally," Diskey said. "I think we're on the cusp of a whole new area of research and comprehension about what digital learning means."

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## Troubled Schools Try Mimicking the Charters

New York Times

By: Sam Dillon

September 6, 2011

[http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/06/education/06houston.html?\\_r=2&ref=education](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/06/education/06houston.html?_r=2&ref=education)

HOUSTON — Classrooms are festooned with college pennants. Hallway placards proclaim: "No Excuses!" Students win prizes for attendance. They start classes earlier and end later than their neighbors; some return to school on Saturdays. And they get to pore over math problems one-on-one with newly hired tutors, many of them former accountants and engineers.

If these new mores at Lee High School, long one of Houston's most troubled campuses, make it seem like one of those intense [charter schools](#), that is no accident.

In the first experiment of its kind in the country, the Houston public schools are testing whether techniques proven successful in high-performing urban charters can also help raise achievement in regular public schools. Working with Roland G. Fryer, a researcher at Harvard who studies the racial achievement gap, Houston officials last year embraced five key tenets of such

charters at nine district secondary schools; this fall, they are expanding the program to 11 elementary schools. A similar effort is beginning in Denver.

“We can’t sit idly by and let parents think that only the quality charter schools can educate poor kids well,” said Terry Grier, Houston’s hard-charging superintendent. “If you see something good, why not try to replicate it?”

When first conceived 20 years ago, charter schools — which are publicly financed but independently operated — offered two distinct promises: to serve as an escape hatch for children in failing schools, and to be incubators of innovation that, through market forces, would invigorate neighborhood schools. There are scores of examples of the former, but almost none of the latter. Instead, years of bickering have ensued among charter advocates, school boards and teachers’ unions.

“One of the rationales for charters was that they would figure out practices that could be adopted by school districts,” said Grover J. Whitehurst, a fellow at the Brookings Institution and former federal education official. “I hope Roland succeeds, because if he does it’ll be a very important demonstration that bad public schools can be fixed.”

Houston is an apt laboratory. It is the birthplace of the Knowledge Is Power Program, or KIPP, a national charter chain, as well as home to 105 charters [that compete with the district’s 300 schools for students and tax dollars](#). Texas also bars union shops, so school districts often have more leeway in managing teachers’ work than elsewhere.

The experiment, which is known as Apollo 20 and cost \$19 million in its first year, has had mixed results: Lee High School saw double-digit gains on state tests last spring, moving to “acceptable” on the Texas school report card system after many years of being rated “unacceptable.” But four of the nine Apollo schools remained on the unacceptable list, and at some the percentage of students passing state tests actually dipped.

Dr. Fryer, an economist and head of Harvard’s EdLabs, a research group, has gained national attention in recent years as the architect of incentive programs that offered students cash for improved performance, including one in New York City that was discontinued after being deemed ineffective. In recent years, he has visited scores of charter schools nationwide. “Some should be closed down this afternoon,” he said, but others have virtually erased the achievement gap between poor minority students and their white peers.

In 2009, Dr. Fryer identified five policies common to successful charters, including those run by KIPP and the Harlem Children’s Zone: longer school days and years; more rigorous and selective hiring of principals and teachers; frequent quizzes whose results determine what needs to be retaught; what he calls “high-dosage tutoring”; and a “no excuses” culture.

He then set about trying to find a public schools superintendent willing to embrace them. Neither Joel I. Klein in New York nor Michelle Rhee in Washington bit; officials in Omaha decided the political risks of copying charters were too high.

But in February 2010, Dr. Fryer spoke by phone with Dr. Grier, who had been on the job in Houston for six months. As a superintendent in eight other districts over 25 years, Dr. Grier had won plaudits from some educators for trying things like pay for performance and teacher bonuses. “How soon can you get down here?” Dr. Fryer recalled him asking.

Over the next six months, the two men selected the Apollo schools, hired several new principals and scores of new teachers and recruited and trained about 200 math tutors. In the process, the district paid \$6 million in severance to 100 teachers who chose to retire rather than participate, and agreed to pay others for working extra hours (something charters often do not do). The Houston Federation of Teachers, the city’s largest union, took no formal position on the project.

The preparations were intense: half an hour before Dr. Fryer’s wedding in June last year, Dr. Grier called his cellphone to review some details.

“Literally, I said, ‘Terry, I’ve got to go, I’ve got to get married. I’ll call you back,’ ” Dr. Fryer recalled.

One person watching the experiment closely is Mike Feinberg, who co-founded the first KIPP school here in 1994, and now serves on the program’s national board and runs its 20 Houston-area charters. Mr. Feinberg sees Houston’s education marketplace as akin to when FedEx emerged to challenge the United States Postal Service. The result: Priority Mail.

“They’ve been trying to fix Lee High School for 20 years,” he said. “But up until now, there’s been no competitive pressure for them to really get crazy and do transformational things.”

One of those transformational things at Lee High was hiring 50 full-time math tutors, who are paid \$20,000 a year — less than \$14 an hour — plus benefits and possible bonuses if their students do well.

“I don’t get this,” Jennifer Martinez, a junior wearing an “I love boys” bracelet, told her tutor, Gerald Frentz, an engineer, one day last week.

They were talking about integers. Mr. Frentz, 56, retired from the Navy in 1986 and has since worked at Wang Computer and been a tae kwon do instructor and substitute teacher. Jennifer’s puzzlement visibly faded as he explained how negative 7 and positive 7 have the same absolute value — [definition: distance from zero](#) — but are separated by 14 ticks along a number line.

"It's an addictive experience," Mr. Frentz said of the tutoring.

Lee High's new principal, Xochitl Rodríguez-Dávila, described a torrent of challenges, including the exhaustive review of transcripts and test results to organize class schedules and tutoring for 1,600 students; persuading parents to sign KIPP-style contracts pledging that they would help raise achievement; and replacing about a third of Lee's 100 teachers.

"Teachers by far have been the biggest struggle," said Ms. Rodríguez-Dávila, 39, who previously was a middle school principal.

In faculty meetings, she said, some people insisted that Lee's immigrant students would never master biology or physics. Other veterans, though, told the complainers to stop belly-aching and get on with the turnaround.

Dr. Fryer, who has made 17 trips to Houston over the past year, is watching not only the Apollo schools but a parallel control group of other Houston schools with similar demographics and prior test results, to rigorously analyze the effectiveness of the three-year experiment.

Even without the formal study, Dr. Grier knows that the mimicking of charter practices is, at best, partial. The academic year started Aug. 15 at the nine Apollo secondary schools, a week ahead of the rest of the district — and the same day as KIPP. But even with Apollo's lengthened days, KIPP students had still more instructional hours last year: about 1,735, compared with about 1,435 at Lee High School.

"We got close, but we didn't get there completely," Dr. Grier said.

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## **FLORIDA NEWS**

### **Representative Mike Weinstein's bill would set minimum Florida must spend on education**

Florida Times-Union

By: Matt Dixon

September 5, 2011

<http://m.jacksonville.com/news/florida/2011-09-05/story/rep-mike-weinsteins-bill-would-set-minimum-florida-must-spend>

A bill aimed at figuring out the exact amount needed to fund Florida's public schools is set to make its second run at becoming law.

The legislation, filed by Rep. Mike Weinstein, R-Jacksonville, would ask the research arm of the Legislature to conduct a study to figure out the minimum amount the state needs to spend per student to satisfy a constitutional requirement that mandates "adequate" funding for public education.

He said finding an exact figure, which has never been produced, will help bring stability to local school districts.

"To run a business where year in year out you are in chaos and you don't know where your budget is going to be is tough," said Weinstein, who noted that in many counties school districts are the largest employer.

Because it's a large percentage of the state budget, a hefty dose of political wrangling goes into setting public school funding levels.

"Every year they face headlines about how much they are going to have to cut," Weinstein said.

The bill, he argued, would at least determine a baseline level of funding, so school districts would have a foundation to build their budgets earlier.

Some in the education community agree.

"I honestly don't know how they can expect education to run like a business and yet have no idea what the bottom line is," said Deborah Gianoulis, chairwoman of the nonprofit education advocacy group Save Duval Schools.

She said she did not think the bill had the hidden motivation of setting funding below current levels, thus giving lawmakers outside cover to make deeper cuts.

"I think Rep. Weinstein is making a truly genuine effort," she said.

The push to get an exact funding number comes at the tail end of nearly 2-year-old lawsuit filed by education advocates asking a judge to determine if Florida schools are adequately funded.

Jon Mills, the lead attorney on the lawsuit, would not stake out a position on the Weinstein bill, and called it "interesting." He hedged when asked if the bill could represent an attempt to further cut public education funding.

"That's why I said [the bill] is interesting," he said. "One of the things I've sworn never to do is guess the motivations of the Legislature."

The lawsuit he is shepherding through the legal system is before the 1st District Court of Appeals, which has set no timetable for a ruling.

Weinstein filed an identical bill last year that did not even get a committee hearing.

As for this year?

"I think if enough citizens get behind it, and enough media outlets talk about it, we will have better success," Weinstein said.

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## Many makeovers later, FCAT progress hard to measure

Palm Beach Post

By: Allison Ross

September 5, 2011

<http://www.palmbeachpost.com/news/schools/many-makeovers-later-fcat-progress-hard-to-measure-1821604.html>

Like a washed-up starlet, Florida's writing FCAT keeps going under the knife.

In the past seven years, the all-important exam has had five major makeovers.

In 2006, state education officials stitched on a multiple-choice section, only to lop it off in 2009.

In 2005, they lifted the test's proficiency level for individual students from a 3 out of 6 to a 3.5.

In 2010, they changed it back to 3.

In 2011, they boosted it to 4.

Even after all those nips and tucks, the writing Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test will look different again this year.

And this year's changes will not be the last, with the state moving to adopt new national Common Core State Standards. By 2014-2015, all students in Florida will be taking new tests under these core standards instead of the current math and English exams.

The saga of Florida's fluctuating writing FCAT exemplifies the transient targets set by Florida's high-stakes standardized tests. The multitude of changes - made to nearly every major state assessment - has at times made valid year-to-year comparisons nearly impossible.

"It's hard to make informed decisions about how you're doing when you're changing the criteria for scoring," said Marc Baron, the Palm Beach County School District's chief of performance accountability.

For instance, in 2010 the state had a record number of A-rated and B-rated high schools. In Palm Beach County, 86 percent of high schools earned A's or B's, compared with 52 percent the previous year.

But later, an analysis by The Palm Beach Post found that the year-to-year jump was the result of state changes in how high schools were graded, not because the students at those schools did considerably better. The Post's analysis discovered that, had the state used the previous year's grading formula, most of that jump would not have happened.

"With an ever-changing test, just like ever-changing criteria for school grades, the year-to-year trends become less meaningful," said Robert Schaeffer, public education director for FairTest: The National Center for Fair and Open Testing in Massachusetts. "It becomes very hard to do trend analysis because the test has changed so much over time."

Florida's grading scale has changed most years since the test was put in place in the late 1990s, said Sherman Dorn, a professor of education at the University of South Florida. That's not a rare occurrence for high-stakes tests nationwide, he added.

"But are there problems with comparability?" he said. "Yeah. In some ways, it's the nature of the beast."

Dorn and others who study testing say that assessment systems usually change over time in an effort to make them more rigorous or comprehensive - or sometimes because of shifting political pressures, including budget concerns.

Before Florida's high school grading formula changed, Dorn said, "superintendents had been griping for years that their high schools couldn't get good grades." He suggested that the formula change was due at least in part to political pressure.

Kris Ellington, assistant deputy commissioner of the Florida Department of Education, said changes to the state's standardized tests and school-scoring system are intended to improve them and to help students become more college- and career-ready.

The state works hard to create ways to compare tests year to year despite changes, Ellington said.

"There are measurements, procedures for linking two tests," Ellington said. "While it's not as clean as having the same test year after year, there are ways to connect and continue to analyze our progress on student learning."

For instance, when the state switched some FCATs to a new, harder FCAT 2.0 last year, it reported scores of new tests on the old FCAT scale as FCAT-equivalent scores. The reason was to make the scores more comparable year over year.

But it wasn't a completely clean transition: The state warned at the time that comparisons between scores on the FCAT 2.0 and the previous year's FCATs "should be made with caution."

There were similar issues in 2010, when the state made changes to the writing FCAT because of budget cuts. Then-Education Commissioner Eric Smith called it a "stand-alone" year for the test because the changes had rendered comparisons to previous years difficult.

The Palm Beach County School District's accountability office has had many discussions about how to look at achievement and growth when the scoring or the test changes from year to year, Baron said. In the end, though, it's the final score that matters for schools and students, he said.

Schools that receive an A or improve at least one letter grade are eligible to earn an additional \$70 per student, while schools that do poorly are subject to sanctions and state intervention.

"If you're keeping track of the number of A's, the number of B's, the number of C's, that's not comparable from year to year," Baron said. "But the rules are the rules, whether you footnote them or not."

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## **STATE NEWS**

### **27 virtual schools set to open in Wisconsin, a jump over 15 in 2010-'11**

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

By: Erin Richards

September 5, 2011

<http://www.jsonline.com/news/education/129275208.html>

Michael Dieffenbach returned to school last week to listen to teachers explain what would be expected during the term.

It was his last first day of high school. Senior year. Top of the heap.

But it didn't feel like that when Dieffenbach opened his laptop, stretched out on his twin bed, and logged into his AP government class. Lucky, the family dog, sprawled on the floor beneath his feet.

Since eighth grade, Dieffenbach has attended Wisconsin Virtual Learning, a public charter school of the Northern Ozaukee School District and one of the dozens of virtual schools in the state that educate students each year without desks, lunch periods, yellow buses or extracurricular sports.

His small bedroom has been his classroom for years. His laptop the portal to some students he's never seen, some teachers he's never met.

"I suppose you could use it as an excuse to become a hermit," says Dieffenbach, 17, who is wearing a black T-shirt and jeans as he waits for the other classmates to arrive to the AP government webinar. "But if you make just a little effort, it's pretty easy to get involved in your community and stuff outside of school."

People often question how students could go to school in an entirely online environment, devoid of regular face-to-face contact with teachers. What about social interaction with friends? Is it rigorous? What about prom and senior skip day? How do kids do once they graduate and go to college?

That shouldn't be a concern for Dieffenbach. The College Board recently informed him that he scored a perfect 36 on his ACT last year, something accomplished by less than one-tenth of 1% of all test takers. Dieffenbach got a 34 the first time. He thought he could do better.

This year he's taking a host of advanced placement classes: AP calculus, AP macro and micro economics, AP physics, AP Spanish and AP government. Wisconsin Virtual Learning contracted with a national provider of online courses for some of those because there's not enough demand in the high school.

Instead of physical education class, Dieffenbach goes for a jog, lifts weights, does chores or walks Lucky. He's also training for a marathon, but the cost to do one is pretty expensive, so he thinks he might just run it on his own, around the neighborhood.

"I looked up a training schedule online," he said.

School lunch is whenever he wants it, which is sometimes not at all.

After-school activities are replaced with a full itinerary of church and youth group meetings: National Honor Society, juggling, rock climbing, geocaching and Boy Scouts. Dieffenbach became an Eagle Scout at age 14 and has so many merit badges that they completely fill more than one sash. His dad says they total 85.

### *Proud parents*

Dieffenbach's parents do a lot of the talking. They had their only son later in life, and they're pretty proud of him.

Sylvia Dieffenbach decided to home-school Michael after he came back from the neighborhood elementary school near where they live on Milwaukee's northwest side and said he wasn't learning anything.

Warren Dieffenbach works second shift, and home schooling at that time allowed them to have breakfast and prayer as a family in the morning.

Then the Dieffenbachs learned about Wisconsin's virtual school programs. Wisconsin Virtual Learning started in 2003 and now has about 700 students in kindergarten through 12th grade, with about 180 at the high school level.

Back in Dieffenbach's bedroom, the voice of AP government teacher Eric Conn came through the laptop. Conn teaches from a home office in his house in Oshkosh. He talked to the students about class expectations and ran through a PowerPoint-like slide show that appeared on all six of the students' screens across the state.

Later in an interview, Conn said it's a challenge to keep kids engaged without in-person visual cues.

"You have to convey material without it being boring," Conn said. "I don't use a webcam, so I treat it like I'm on the radio. I use a lot of inflection."

Conn says most of the students prefer to correspond by typing live in response to his verbal questions. Sometimes he tells them to use their microphones instead. It's faster for discussion, he said.

Because of the high school's size, Dieffenbach and his classmates have had Conn and some of their other teachers every year for the same subjects.

Conn called Dieffenbach extremely independent, the sort of student teachers love because he asks challenging questions that you have to think about, and that makes you a better teacher.

Dieffenbach is considering a career in bioengineering or molecular research. He hopes to go to Brigham Young University or MIT.

His parents hope for that, too. And for scholarships.

"(Virtual school) isn't for everyone," said Silvia Dieffenbach. "But he wanted it, so that was part of it. You do have to be a self-starter."

### *Virtual schools*

Twenty-seven virtual schools in Wisconsin were scheduled to open this academic year - a substantial increase over the 15 virtual charter schools operating in 2010-'11, which enrolled just under 4,000 students.

Gov. Scott Walker's budget recently eliminated the cap on the number of students who can use the state's open enrollment system to enroll in virtual charter schools. The cap had limited the number of students enrolled in virtual schools to 5,250.

Enrollment numbers for 2011-'12 won't be known until schools count their students on the third Friday of September.

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## **Ohio: Vouchers provide lifeline for private schools**

Cincinnati Inquirer

By: Denise Smith Amos

September 4, 2011

<http://news.cincinnati.com/article/20110903/NEWS0102/109040343/Vouchers-provide-lifeline-private-schools>

CHEVIOT - Students and staff at St. Martin of Tours Elementary are celebrating 100 years of schooling this fall.

They walked on red carpet last week under archways of maroon and white balloons. Principal Carolyn Murphy plans more activities later this year.

But behind the scenes, Murphy is cheering on another anniversary - the six-year mark for Ohio's Educational Choice vouchers, the tax-funded scholarships that pay tuition for more than 70 percent of St. Martin's students.

This year and next, EdChoice's funding could double, ensuring long-term survival of the controversial yet thriving state education program and of private schools like hers.

"It helped keep the doors open at St. Martin," Murphy said of EdChoice. "It gives parents a choice they might not have had. On the West Side, which is so heavily populated with Catholic schools, you're fighting for each student."

EdChoice is a state-administered scholarship program that directs education funds out of public school districts to private schools to pay tuition for students whose families live near chronically under-performing public schools.

Many states have scholarship programs for low-income students. But EdChoice is the only state program in the nation that ignores families' ability to pay and instead pays tuition for students if they live near a persistently failing public school.

This year, more than 17,000 would-be public school students across Ohio applied for EdChoice scholarships, called vouchers, up from 13,240 vouchers awarded last year.

"These are people ... who are unhappy with the services delivered by (public) schools and they are exercising their choice," said Chad Aldis, executive director of School Choice Ohio, a Columbus-based, pro-voucher group.

Proponents say EdChoice increases chances for high school graduation and college for disadvantaged students, although Ohio does not track figures to prove that.

Detractors say EdChoice mostly funds religious schools, while taking millions of dollars from public schools, and those private schools face less state scrutiny.

"So far, the limited data doesn't show voucher schools doing any better than public schools," said Janet Walsh, spokeswoman for Cincinnati Public schools. "Besides, the people who are taking advantage of (vouchers) may well have already decided they weren't sending their students to public schools."

Cincinnati Public, the region's largest public school district, is slated to lose 3,646 students to EdChoice this year, including 1,201 first-time voucher applicants, state data show. That represents a loss of about \$15.6 million in state funding.

Last year, more than 2,610 Cincinnati students using Ed Choice scholarships resulted in more than \$13.5 million transferred from district coffers to private schools, according to state data.

That number is expected to continue to grow.

Since June, EdChoice's potential state funding has doubled. The previous annual limit on vouchers of 14,000 a year was increased to 30,000 for the current school year and to 60,000 next year.

Ohio's legislators also loosened eligibility for EdChoice and extended its application period by several months (to Aug. 15). Thus, the number of students eligible for a voucher climbed from about 84,000 to 90,000.

But only a fraction of eligible students apply. For this year, 17,003 students sought vouchers, including 5,000 first-time applicants.

To be eligible for EdChoice, a student's neighborhood public school has to have been in Academic Watch or Emergency for at least two of the last three years. The change approved in June broadened that to include any public school in the lowest 10 percent of all public schools in a performance index in Ohio's Report Cards.

That way, regardless of school ratings, EdChoice would survive as a program.

Each EdChoice scholarship pays up to \$4,250 per student per year for elementary tuition and up to \$5,000 for high school tuition.

This school year, if each applicant receives their maximum scholarship amount, EdChoice would remove \$73.8 million from public districts' coffers. That is 39 percent more than the \$53.2 million Ohio took from public schools last year to fund EdChoice.

Once a student receives an EdChoice voucher, they can renew it each year through high school.

Vanessa Heppard, a mother of three who lives in Mount Auburn, has never put a child in public school.

Her third-grade son attends Aldersgate Christian Academy in Mount Auburn, using a voucher, and her kindergarten son recently got his voucher to attend there, thanks to the expansion of EdChoice.

She said her public school options were not promising. She believes several public and charter schools near her home are not

safe or academically challenging.

"Education is for life," she said. "I want them to have the best opportunity."

EdChoice has given private schools catering to low-income, inner-city students new financial life. Jim Rigg, superintendent of schools for Cincinnati's archdiocese, said the program ensures low-income families can afford Catholic schools.

"(Without EdChoice) we would almost certainly lose students, particularly among families who might normally be unable to afford the cost of tuition," he said.

On the other hand, since private schools' cost for educating each EdChoice student is less than state and local taxpayers would have to spend if those students were attending public schools, Rigg said, taxpayers save a total of \$1.7 billion a year through EdChoice.

The growth in available scholarships means a rosier future for private schools struggling to maintain enrollment during the recession.

St Martin, for instance, had 514 students in 2002-03 but just 216 last year. This year, the K-8 school enrolled 246 students, and 178 will receive EdChoice vouchers for tuition.

Cincinnati Public and Ohio's other large school districts are most vulnerable to EdChoice because they have the highest numbers of schools with the lowest state ratings.

Fewer students should lower their school costs, EdChoice proponents say. But even in major districts, the loss of only a few students per class isn't enough to produce substantial savings for districts, said Jonathan Boyd, CPS's outgoing treasurer.

Even so, EdChoice is proving to be a lifeline for many private schools. At least 20 Cincinnati-area private and parochial schools will get state-paid tuition for 100 or more students, thanks to EdChoice. Another 44 local schools will receive tuition for fewer than 100 students.

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## Tennessee 'Virtual School' Hits Enrollment Hiccup

Chattanooga Times Free Press

By: Andy Sher

September 2, 2011

[http://www.edweek.org/dd/articles/2011/09/02/03mct\\_tnvirtual.h31.html](http://www.edweek.org/dd/articles/2011/09/02/03mct_tnvirtual.h31.html)

*Nashville, Tenn.* – As many as half of the more than 2,000 students applying to attend the state's first public online academy have yet to be enrolled some three weeks into the beginning of the privately-operated institution's school year, officials say. Union County Schools Director Wayne Goforth and officials at K12 Inc., a Herndon, Va., for-profit virtual school company that runs Union County's Tennessee Virtual Academy, blame problems on a variety of factors.

They range from more students than expected applying to issues some parents face in gathering and submitting by e-mail or fax documents establishing state residency, birth certificates and proof of immunization.

"This whole concept here has just really surprised us all in Tennessee in terms of enrollment and demand," Goforth said.

But another issue involved, Goforth said, is the refusal by some school districts to approve the transfer of their students who did not meet the July 24 deadline on such transfers between school districts.

He estimated about 1,100 children have been enrolled and taking instruction from Tennessee-based teachers via computer since the virtual school opened its "doors" on Aug. 8.

"I think somewhere about that many more of those have yet to be enrolled," said Goforth, who had no figures immediately at hand detailing delays by various categories.

Some parents posting on a Tennessee Virtual Academy Facebook page complained of delays and other problems. A number of others who are enrolled and have received their equipment and lesson plans praised the program.

The Republican-controlled General Assembly this spring approved legislation expanding the use of online coursework to include an entire school and permitting local systems to contract with for-profit companies.

Most Democrats fiercely opposed the measure, saying it was wrong to allow for-profit companies to siphon off taxpayer dollars. Under state law, Goforth said, students seeking to transfer after the open enrollment date "have to seek the approval of the sending district, and that has caused us a lot of ups and downs."

"A lot of times the directors don't want to give permission for them to leave," Goforth said. "And that's their choice. I see their [state] funding because in Tennessee, the funding follows the child."

He estimated the county receives about \$5,300 in state funds for every child who attends the Tennessee Virtual Academy. Goforth said he hears from parents that "one of the main" systems denying approval of late transfers is the Hamilton County schools system.

Hamilton County Schools Director Rick Smith said he has denied approving the transfers of 14 students, who were enrolled in the local school system last year, because their applications were late.

He said he only got an email from Goforth on Aug. 6—days after the July 24 transfer deadline—listing 26 students seeking a late transfer.

Twelve had not been public school students at all, Smith said, and presumably had attended private schools or were being home-schooled. He said he had no authority regarding them.

Smith said after talking to parents of students and parents of those outside the public school system, he learned that families learned about the Tennessee Virtual Academy at various times following an advertising and promotion push by K12.

Smith said the district abides by deadlines for Hamilton County parents wishing to get their children into the system's highly desirable magnet schools. It should be no different in approving late transfers.

He noted he has no idea how many local students might have applied and enrolled in the Tennessee Virtual Academy prior to the July 24 deadline. The system has no power over their transfer, he said.

Union County schools receive a 4 percent administrative oversight fee. K12 receives the rest, but K12 and Goforth point out that the for-profit company is by no means reaping pure profit because of fixed costs including teachers, curriculum, online software development and equipment.

Sen. Andy Berke, D-Chattanooga, a critic of allowing the for-profit companies to run entire virtual schools said that "when the idea was officially floated in the Legislature, one of the arguments was that locals would be able to decide whether they wanted it. In fact, in the last days of session, I figured out that all it would take was one county to want to do it and every county would be affected.

"This is one more way in which we're taking away the control that local bodies have to decide these important issues," Berke said.

Goforth said any of the state's school systems could have created a virtual school just as Union County has through K12.

He said some of Berke's criticisms, outlined in a recent *Chattanooga Times Free Press* column, "looked like somebody uninformed to me."

While Hamilton County offers online remedial courses for students, Smith said he knows very little about the operations of the virtual schools.

"Some of them are very large companies as I understand this one [K12] is," Smith said. "The fact of the matter is when I got the email, I didn't know anything about them. I just knew they didn't meet a particular timeline of application."

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