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NATIONAL NEWS

New Rating System Targets Media's Education Potential

Education Week

By: Ian Quillen

May 25, 2011

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/05/25/32ratings.h30.html?ktn=TOPFGq9ztPHoaWw6%2FNnj2kaw3Fibvyf8IPWr&cmp=clp-edweek>

Common Sense Media plans to expand its review system

A nonprofit group aimed at helping educators and parents shape children's media consumption will move beyond rating movies, video games, and websites for appropriateness and begin evaluating those same media offerings' educational potential.

San Francisco-based [Common Sense Media](#), a frequent adviser to the U.S. Department of Education on matters of media and digital literacy, announced the launch of its new education ratings and review program last week. The program will be financed through a partnership with the [Susan Crown Exchange](#), a Chicago-based philanthropy founded by its namesake that is focused on finding "innovative ways of driving social change," according to its website.

Liz Perle, the editor-in-chief of Common Sense Media, said the aim is to eventually give parents, teachers, and students the ability to select a skill they wish to learn and be driven to a list of resources that provide opportunities for learning that skill. In a perfect world, she said, the initiative could spark producers of commercial media for children—websites, videos, or games—to scaffold more educational value into their products.

"It will put pressure on media creators to create better and better media that help kids build skills more and more," said Ms. Perle, who acknowledged that the project is still several months from its first iteration, which will come toward the end of this year. "Whenever you make somebody accountable, most of these people want to live up to it. Most people want to help kids learn more. It's in their best interest if they've got a game kids can learn from and also enjoy playing."

But others—particularly those in the digital-gaming industry—question the methods Common Sense Media has used to rate content for appropriateness, its capacity to produce enough volume of reviews to affect media industries, and its relative lack of expertise in identifying educational elements.

Although Common Sense Media distributes a free digital-literacy curriculum for students in grades 4-8, and in its new venture will work from criteria created from "in-depth discussions" with more than 20 experts across disciplines ranging from education theory to video-game making, Susan Crown said the service would be focused toward highlighting educational potential rather than guaranteeing results. ("[New Elementary Digital Literacy Curriculum Out.](#)" November 23, 2010.)

"We're not attempting to rate learning content. We're trying to rate learning opportunities," said Ms. Crown, who is also an officer with the Chicago investment firm Henry Crown and Co. "You can't just say your kid's going to be a genius if you play this game, but you can say this is an extremely good game for problem-solving."

Ms. Crown called her philanthropy's contribution to the effort a "large, multiyear grant," but would not elaborate on its price tag. Ms. Perle added that, when looking at which videos, games, and sites to evaluate first, the media group will operate on the "80-20 rule," meaning that it will focus first on the 20 percent of the products that it says make up 80 percent of the market. The same rule, she said, has driven other Common Sense Media endeavors.

Understanding the Criteria

Common Sense Media's current reviews include written descriptions as well as ratings on a scale of zero to 5 for an assortment of elements that include "the good stuff," like ease of play for games or thematic messages for movies, and "the bad stuff," such as violent, sexual, or commercial content. Each reviewed product is then given a minimum age-appropriateness level. And all of the reviews are available for free.

While outside observers note that Common Sense Media's analysis is perhaps more balanced and descriptive than that of other media watchdog groups, they also express concern that users have little information to discern the exact criteria used to arrive at those ratings. And they say determining the educational potential of media, particularly games, and particularly in the classroom instead of at home, is a far more difficult process.

Further, Richard N. Van Eck, an associate professor and graduate director of instructional design and technology at the University of North Dakota, in Grand Forks, doubts game makers would pay much attention to the rating system unless it were found to significantly affect sales. And other than with games designed expressly for educational purposes, he said, it's possible game makers may actually fear that a positive rating would negatively affect the business image, because educational gaming has the reputation for being boring.

"They kind of have a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy with this," Mr. Van Eck said. "They say, 'If you want to use us in an educational setting, great, but don't call us an educational game.'"

Ms. Crown said she understands the experimental and uncertain nature of the project, but stressed that both she and Common Sense Media Chief Executive Officer Linda Burch see the importance of at least establishing a framework that can evolve and be refined over time.

"It's not going to be absolutely right, but we've got to put something down on paper and get it started," Ms. Crown said. "Is it realistic? Who knows? I hope it's useful enough to parents and helps us bring up the quality level, or at least lets us know what the quality level is."

Mr. Van Eck conceded that Common Sense Media's mainstream appeal could provide a boost to the educational use of commercial media, since other groups that review media for educational content are better known by industry insiders than by parents and teachers.

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Charter Schooling & Citizenship

Education Next

By: Frederick Hess

May 23, 2011

<http://educationnext.org/charter-schooling-citizenship/>

I'm an advocate for charter schooling. Regular readers of [my blog](#) know that this is not because I'm convinced they're the answer to the "achievement gap" or to driving up math and reading scores, but because chartering offers an opportunity to rethink how we go about teaching, learning, and schooling. In that context, I've long been concerned that our rethinking is almost entirely focused on reading and math scores and graduation rates and the result can yield a reflexive, frail conception of schooling. If we're going to reinvent schools, I'd like us to do so in a manner that respects the broad purpose of the schoolhouse, which means paying due attention to the arts, to a rich curriculum, and, perhaps most important of all, to helping students develop as moral individuals and citizens.

As part of our ongoing effort to explore and promote citizenship education at AEI (see, for instance, [here](#)), we had the pleasure of convening an array of terrific charter school leaders and teachers in San Francisco yesterday. The topic: how they approach citizenship education and gauge their performance, and what steps might help to encourage or support such efforts.

A bunch of intriguing issues arose, and charter impresario Robin Lake will be exploring them in a white paper that we'll be issuing this fall. For the moment, five particular points stuck with me:

First, I was pleasantly surprised by the admirable humility of the terrific charter school leaders and educators. I'd feared that this collection of educators would be dismissive of concerns as to whether they were doing all they could to develop moral character, civic knowledge, and engaged citizens. I need not have worried. In a conversation that included representatives from KIPP, YES Prep, Cesar Chavez High School for Public Policy, UNO, High Tech High, Basis, National Heritage Academies, Basis, and Democracy Prep, among others, participants talked bluntly about the need to do far better when it comes to developing character, cultivating citizenship, and monitoring their performance in these areas.

Second, the question arose as to whether parents actually care about whether schools are cultivating good citizens. One educator asked, "Do parents choose [us] because of the civic mission?" He answered his own question, "No." That was the consensus. Another school founder observed that, generally speaking, "Our parents don't give a [hoot] about democracy walking in the door. They come because of our academic performance, and because their kids will be safe." That said, it also seemed true that schools which deliver academically earn the parental trust that positions them to move as aggressively as they wish on issues of citizenship and character; the question is what they do with that.

Third, charters are particularly well-suited to tackle these questions because they don't have to wrestle with all the parental griping and constituency politics that hamper district efforts to establish strong codes of conduct, to encourage political participation, or to promote character development. Charter schools can make their civic vision an explicit part of their appeal, so that supportive families can seek them out, and others can go elsewhere.

Fourth, questions of citizenship are peripheral when it comes to charter authorizing. National Association of Charter School Authorizers president Greg Richmond pointed out that there are real, substantive disagreements over how to understand the civic mission of schooling. And, “when you can’t agree what to measure, it’s hard to focus on metrics”—so authorizers focus on less controversial measures, like reading and math scores. He also pointed out that public school officials long excused mediocrity by saying, “Maybe our kids can’t read or write, but we’re preparing them to be good citizens.” This abuse, he noted, resulted in “toxic backlash.” Today, Richmond couldn’t think of any authorizer that meaningfully incorporates citizenship criteria into its decisions. Seth Andrews of Democracy Prep raised the question of how educators might start to transform citizenship from a “soft skill” into a “hard skill.”

Fifth, the question arose as to whether schools serving disadvantaged students can or should actively seek to encourage students to feel an affection or attachment to the nation. Green Dot founder Steve Barr made the case that schools can’t simply expect to teach at-risk students to be patriotic, because these kids haven’t seen much from their nation that would incline them to love it—and that these kids need to build trust in the U.S. system before they can be expected to feel attached to it. He said, “When you’re around [intense] poverty and injustice, citizenship has a different meaning. Just shaking hands and getting along is a big deal. If you want more, it requires building trust.”

Finally, for what it’s worth, a few terrific lines really struck me during the day:

“One complication with encouraging student activism is it can burn them out. We had a kid who went to two anti-war protests and, when the war didn’t stop, he lost interest.”

“The best way to imagine what I want our grads to be like is, if I’m a criminal defendant, I want kids who graduate who I’d want to be on my jury.”

“Right now, [citizenship] just isn’t a priority. I’ve got five jobs, and that’s my fifth. I’m a history teacher, then an ELL teacher, then a dance teacher, then a 9th grade chair, and then the service learning coordinator. This means service learning is what I do Sunday night.”

“We don’t operate as a democracy [in the school], we’re preparing students to be citizens in a democracy.”

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Delaware Pushes to Meet Race to Top Promises

Education Week

By: Michele McNeil

May 25, 2011

[http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/05/25/32delaware_ep.h30.html?](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/05/25/32delaware_ep.h30.html?tkn=RRPF8RB5NtAZEo6n5wJHlb1aboFlkcHEBmO&cmp=clp-edweek)

[tkn=RRPF8RB5NtAZEo6n5wJHlb1aboFlkcHEBmO&cmp=clp-edweek](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/05/25/32delaware_ep.h30.html?tkn=RRPF8RB5NtAZEo6n5wJHlb1aboFlkcHEBmO&cmp=clp-edweek)

Wilmington, Del. – In one English classroom here, [Delcastle Technical High School](#) teacher Nicole Irani experimented over the past few weeks with open- and closed-book quizzes, closely monitoring how her students performed on one type of test compared with another.

In a different English classroom, her colleague David Pody watched over the span of a semester as his students did far better on more complicated, open-ended test questions than the cut-and-dried variety.

Later, during a 45-minute common professional-development time for teachers, data coach Brenda Dorrell plumbed the experiences of the school’s English teachers, who are part of a pilot program financed by the federal Race to the Top program that seeks to inject data into the conversations, culture, and classrooms across Delaware.

The Delcastle High teachers are on the front lines of a push to deliver on promises that last year won Delaware, 10 other states, and the District of Columbia shares of the [Race to the Top](#) pie, the \$4 billion competition that is driving much of the Obama administration’s education agenda.

Here in Delaware, officials are more than a quarter of the way into their four-year effort to bring to life a [235-page plan](#) funded with \$119 million in Race to the Top money, part of the economic-stimulus package Congress passed in 2009. It’s a fraction of total education funding even in this small state, which spends about \$1 billion each year on K-12.

The state’s Race to the Top to-do list is long, but Delaware officials are methodically starting to check off some initiatives. The data-coaching program, like the one at Delcastle High, has been launched. This summer, development coaches will work with school administrators on how to better evaluate teachers.

Big things are still ahead. Delaware is just beginning its “partnership zone” program, in which 10 of the lowest-performing schools will be identified to work with the state and with communities to devise turnaround strategies. The state also is hammering out final plans to ensure that, beginning next school year, teachers are evaluated in part on student growth on tests. But speed bumps have emerged. Timelines have slipped as the state works to find the best people and companies to work on Race to the Top projects. And the state has tangled with its largest school district over implementing the reform plan.

“It’s very difficult work,” Gov. Jack Markell, a Democrat, said in an interview. “We were on a path to reform already ... and already worked on a number of these ideas. But this is allowing us to significantly accelerate our work.”

Meeting Promises

Like all other Race to the Top winners, Delaware focused its successful application on the four education improvement priorities set by federal policymakers: improved data systems, standards and assessments, low-performing schools, and teacher and principal effectiveness.

The state's goals? Boost college enrollment to 70 percent, from 59 percent, by 2013-14. Cut in half the racial- and income-achievement gaps that persist on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP. Raise proficiency on NAEP in reading and mathematics for 4th and 8th graders by at least 19 percentage points.

To get there, the state has pitched a series of proposals that include requiring the sat college-entrance exam for all students, and creating a new statewide council to coordinate initiatives in science, technology, engineering, and math, the stem subjects. The biggest task still to complete: figuring out how to appropriately factor student academic growth into teacher evaluations, which will become a new way of life for Delaware's teachers next school year. That's a central tenet component of the promised improvements the state used to win a Race to the Top grant.

Student growth—or “component five,” as those in Delaware call it—is the fifth, final, and most important part of an evaluation system that takes into account other factors, such as a principal's assessment of a teacher's instruction and the classroom environment, and a teacher's professional responsibilities (such as leadership roles taken).

What's left to be determined is the standard for student growth, and that's being worked out at the state department of education.

Not everyone is convinced implementation will go smoothly.

“It's so complicated,” said Steven H. Godowsky, the superintendent of the 3,900-student New Castle County Vocational Technical District, one of three countywide career and technical districts in the state. “Test scores can be very narrow. It's hard to determine the effect of one teacher.”

And the uncertainty has led to some trepidation among teachers, said Susan Bunting, the superintendent of the 8,800-student Indian River district.

“There's a bit of the unknown, and people are getting apprehensive because it's new and it's different,” she said. “But we're trying to put it all in perspective. We're not going to fire all of our teachers.”

Coaching Highlighted

In Delaware, the work of data coaches showcases the potential of the Race to the Top innovations.

“It's a sophisticated approach to decisionmaking,” said Delcastle High's principal, Joseph Jones. “You can break down a class of 25 students into an area in which you can focus.”

For the six English teachers who gathered earlier this month for their coaching session at Delcastle High, working with data doesn't just mean working with standardized-test scores.

Mr. Pody talked about the difference between two assignments he recently gave—one that asked students short-answer, basic questions about a reading, and another that asked them questions that required more sophisticated answers.

“By asking them to look for words that show a change in tone between two characters, they find that perfectly,” he told the other teachers. “My kids do better when assignments require more intelligence.”

The pilot program will expand statewide next school year, when 29 data coaches, hired by the state's contractor, the New York City-based Wireless Generation, will go into approximately 200 schools and work with teachers during common, weekly 90-minute planning sessions. (The chief executive officer of Wireless Generation, Larry Berger, is a trustee of Editorial Projects in Education, which publishes Education Week.)

“The early success we've seen with the data coaching is the acceptance level and the common language among teachers, which is key to making this thing stick,” said Donna Mitchell, the deputy officer of professional development for the Delaware education department's teacher-leader-effectiveness unit.

But even something as seemingly simple as getting teachers together for 90 minutes each week to talk about using data to improve instruction is a challenge.

“There's a lot of pushback, and lots of issues around planning time, and how to make that work schedule-wise,” said Mr. Godowsky of the New Castle County Vocational Technical District. “Having teachers work together collaboratively to look at data, to look at kids, to talk about best practices is a challenge, but it's doable. That's an aspect of Race to the Top that can have dramatic results.”

His district has several Race to the Top-related programs up and running: a new online math course for high school seniors, a teacher-residency program for stem professionals to teach in the district's two Title I high schools, and an expansion of the engineering program Project Lead the Way.

But Mr. Godowsky says the most dramatic effects could be felt at Howard High School, which is getting \$1.4 million in federal school-turnaround money to layer on top of Race to the Top improvements. That's almost as much as the \$1.6 million the entire district is getting from the Race to the Top. The school has a new principal, a new master schedule that emphasizes small learning communities, a new parent-engagement coordinator, and a “summer bridge” program to provide extra learning time for students.

In the Indian River district, which includes both wealthy beach communities along the Atlantic Ocean and neighborhoods where most students are poor enough to qualify for free or subsidized meals, the Race to the Top hasn't brought dramatic change—yet. A new parent center opened last month that will give parents a place to get their questions answered, get quick-and-easy school and district information, and access computers to check up on the academic progress of their children. More instructional coaches are being sprinkled throughout the district.

But next school year, the district is starting a program to get more underrepresented students into Advanced Placement classes. Teachers' weekly planning and professional-development time will become more structured, and will focus much more heavily on data.

“I think Race to the Top has given us some seed money to do things we've never done before,” said Ms. Bunting, the superintendent.

Even in Delaware, which has only 19 school systems and pledges of 100 percent participation from districts and teachers' unions, the Race to the Top has hit a rough patch.

The state got into a very public squabble with the 17,000-student Christina school system, the state's largest district, after the local school board voted to back away from a part of its turnaround plan for two low-performing schools by keeping 19 teachers

who had originally been set for transfers. The state and the school board differ in their interpretations of just how significant that move would have been, but the state nonetheless threatened to withhold the district's entire \$11 million Race to the Top award unless the district went back to its original plan.

Even U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan weighed in, siding with the state and urging the school board to reconsider. Eventually, the board did.

"The unanimity ... that allowed Delaware to win that money is not the day-to-day reality," said John Young, the president of the Christina school board and an outspoken critic of the Race to the Top. He said the power struggle between the district and the state over how to carry out the Race to the Top changes has been noticed by other school boards across the state.

"The state lost a significant amount of trust with school board members," Mr. Young said.

The conflict over school turnarounds in Christina is probably just the beginning of a long road to fully implementing the Race to the Top plan, Gov. Markell said.

"It's going to be an ongoing challenge. People are starting to understand that we meant it," the governor said of the state's aggressive reform plan. "There is an expectation of real change."

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FLORIDA NEWS

Out-of-state school choice cash winning votes, splitting Democrats

Florida Times-Union

By: Matt Dixon

May 24, 2011

<http://jacksonville.com/news/florida/2011-05-24/story/out-of-state-school-choice-cash-winning-votes-splitting-democrats#ixzz1NHYu22aC>

Contributions go to legislators favoring school choice measures.

Out-of-state school choice cash winning votes, splitting Democrats

Over the past five years, a multimillion-dollar effort by a small number of deep-pocketed school-choice advocates has tried to sway state-level elections and rewrite education laws across the country.

Nowhere is the push more evident than Florida.

The small cadre of school-choice backers has been successful in swaying a bloc of Florida House Democrats to support issues largely opposed by their party and unanimously supported by Republicans. The donors are charter school board members, think-tank founders and investors with an eye for education reform.

Since 2006, roughly 15 of them from New York to California have funneled \$233,651 to 25 Democratic candidates in Florida. In addition, two political action committees have spent \$5.5 million buying mailers and conducting polls for candidates they support in Florida.

Winning candidates who received support often buck party lines on issues pushed by school-choice proponents. The biggest recipient is former House member and current state Senate candidate Terry Fields, a Jacksonville Democrat who since 2004 received \$26,500.

The donors seek to strengthen school choice through voucher and charter schools that they say allow parents an alternative. Opponents, historically Democrats and unions, argue the push shifts resources to poorly run, less-accountable schools. In Duval County, 10 of the 23 charter schools opened since 2000 have closed due to poor performance.

"Yes, there is some tension there," said Rep. Geraldine Thompson, D-Orlando, of Democrats who support school-choice legislation; she isn't one. "There are those of us believe there should be accountability, and others who don't."

Democrats who back school-choice measures say their votes are based on what is best for their constituents. One, Rep. Mack Bernard, D-West Palm Beach, has received \$13,600 from school-choice backers since 2008.

"When you have some failing schools in your district," he said, "my approach is to just continue to say, 'Hey, people in my district should get another option.'"

A bloc of roughly 15 elected Democrats have consistently voted over the past two years in favor of school-choice priority bills: one to expand the McKay Scholarship, which allows disabled students to choose which school they attend; another expands virtual schools; and yet another further expands the income tax credit scholarship program.

In 2010, 20 Democrats voted for a bill that would pump an additional \$22 million each year into the income tax credit scholarship, which allows companies to divert tax income to create scholarships for low-income students. Of those, 16 had received a total of \$103,750 in campaign contributions from school-choice proponents since 2008.

When lawmakers created the program in 2001, it received the support of only one Democrat.

Who's targeted

Of the roughly \$233,000 that those groups have sent to Florida Democrats since 2007, nearly two-thirds has gone to African-American candidates.

Fields was one of the first Democrats whom school-choice proponents started backing regularly. The 2012 Senate candidate said he began supporting school-choice issue when a group of constituents questioned why he didn't support the corporate income tax scholarship program.

"A lot of these kids grew up just like I grew up. They were kids from the inner core, poor kids," he said. "Right then I had a change of heart."

Fields pledged to support the tax-credit scholarship in 2004 and four months later received \$7,000 in campaign contributions from out-of-state school choice backers. In addition, his political action committee received \$41,000 from school choice proponents.

The American Federation for Children, a nonprofit whose political action committee has spent nearly \$5 million since early 2010, says the benefits of school choice in districts with poor public schools has led many black Democrats to jump party lines.

"I believe that the reason that African-American Democrats are receptive to the parental choice message is very simple: Their constituents strongly desire it," said John Kirtley, the group's vice chairman who heads its Florida branch.

Public education advocates don't see it that way.

"We have a concern what is occurring is a very deliberate effort to resegregate the schools," said Ron Meyer, a lobbyist for the Florida Education Association. "Many are taking these vouchers and going to unregulated and substandard public schools."

The money people

In 2004, Michigan billionaires Betsy and Dick DeVos founded All Children Matter, a political action committee that spent \$7 million in at least six states, including \$4.1 million in Florida, records show. The organization went belly-up in 2008 after being fined \$5.2 million for illegal campaign contributions in Ohio.

Betsy DeVos, who through a spokesman declined comment, then started the American Federation for Children. The group's PAC has spent nearly \$5 million in six different states, including \$900,000 in Florida. Its nonprofit arm spent more than \$2.1 million in 2009, according to its most recent IRS filing. That year it spent \$824,157 on grants, and \$367,242 on lobbying.

"The amount we invest in supporting educational opportunity for low-income children pales in comparison to the massive political and lobbying apparatus employed by the national teacher's unions, which spend upwards of \$100 million a year on politics and lobbying and make enormous investments in state-level races," spokesman Andrew Campanella said.

Since 2007, the National Education Association funneled \$3.2 million to Public Education Defense Fund run by Florida teachers union. It has spent \$16.1 million on federal races since 2006, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

Another large supporter of state-level candidates in Florida and beyond is New York real estate developer and political activist Howard Rich. Through 14 companies he owns, Rich has funneled \$31,500 to Florida House candidates.

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STATE NEWS

Assembly Education Committee approves bill requiring charter schools to win voter approval

New Jersey Star-Ledger The Star-Ledger

By: Jeanette Rundquist

May 23, 2011

http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2011/05/assembly_education_committee_r.html

TRENTON — A bill that would require charter schools to win voter approval in their communities was voted out of the Assembly Education Committee today, after a number of charter school advocates testified that requiring a referendum could divide communities and doom some schools.

The committee hearing room was packed with charter school supporters and education advocates, and a group of charter school students marched with signs outside the Statehouse before the vote, as the committee considered a package of four bills. All the bills advanced to the full Assembly, including bills that would allow up to three public universities to authorize charters; allow private or parochial schools to convert to charters as long as religion is stricken from the curriculum; and clearly spell out charter school accountability measures.

The bill calling for voter approval, sponsored by Education Committee Chairman Patrick Diegman (D-Middlesex), drew the most controversy. As the number of charter schools increases in New Jersey — there are 73 operating currently, with 23 more approved and another 58 proposed — not all have been broadly welcomed.

In Princeton, for example, where one charter school already operates, the state has also approved plans for a Mandarin Chinese

language immersion school serving students from Princeton, West Windsor and South Brunswick.

Rebecca Cox, president of the Princeton Regional Board of Education, called charters "an unnecessary luxury that local taxpayers just can't afford."

"There is an important role for charter schools in New Jersey, but it isn't in high-performing districts," she said.

In Highland Park and Edison, residents have also opposed plans for charter schools.

Julia Rubin of the organization Save Our Schools — whose daughter attends a charter school — said it is "really a matter of democracy."

"I think some schools would get authorized (if a referendum were required), some would not, but you have to leave it up to the community," she said.

Local school districts provide the funding for charter schools that educate their communities' students, paying 90 percent of the per-pupil cost of the "regular" district.

Several people testified that requiring a referendum could stop the growth of charter schools, however.

Parker Block, one of the organizers of the Princeton International Academy Charter School, cautioned that requiring a referendum on innovative ideas could have a chilling effect.

"Innovation by nature is new and it is not always popular," he said. "If you put innovative programs to a popular vote, in the short term, the popular vote is not always there."

Jonathan Gonzalez, 18, a graduate of Leap Academy Charter High School in Camden, who is now a student at the University of Rochester, said charters need independence.

"Charter schools already face greater challenges than regular public schools," he said. "Why place a blockade?"

The bill advanced with eight "yes" votes and four abstentions — although one abstainer, Assemblyman Joe Malone (R-Burlington) said he is leaning in favor of it.

"Do I think charter schools in some urban areas are absolutely needed? I do," Malone said. "But to have proliferation of charter schools, little boutique schools for specialty things, I think will absolutely decimate the public school system in New Jersey."

The remaining three bills advanced without as much debate, including the accountability bill sponsored by Assemblyman Albert Coutinho (D-Essex). Among other things, it would require that all students in a charter school's district be put into a lottery for attendance, and parents can "opt out" if they want. Currently, parents have to request to have their child's name included in a charter school lottery.

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Los Angeles: High schools offer grade boosts to students who improve test scores

Los Angeles Times

By: Howard Blume

May 24, 2011

<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-laUSD-grades-20110524,0,1934986.story>

A voluntary program at 39 L.A. campuses allows students who improve test scores from one achievement category to the next to qualify for a higher grade.

High schools are offering a new deal at 39 Los Angeles campuses: Students who raise their scores on the state's standardized tests will be rewarded with higher grades in their classes.

If it works, schools also will benefit because low scores can lead to teachers and administrators being fired and schools being closed. A proposed teacher evaluation system relies specifically on these tests for part of an instructor's rating. Even the new superintendent's salary, and his tenure, are tied to scores on the California Standards Tests, which are administered this month.

Yet for students, these tests don't affect grade-point averages, graduation requirements or college applications.

Test scores frequently decline sharply after elementary school in the Los Angeles Unified School District, and the grade-boost strategy, officials hope, could at least address student apathy toward the tests.

"We're always looking for a way to motivate kids to do better in school," said Jefferson High Principal Michael Taft. "I'd see them bubbling in carelessly and say, 'Are you reading that question?' They would say, 'No I'm tired.' They had multiple excuses."

He estimated that 50% weren't trying hard.

The voluntary program being tried this month allows high school students to qualify for a higher grade when they improve their scores from one achievement category to the next: from "below basic" to "basic," for example, or from "proficient" to "advanced." The idea began with Chief Academic Officer Judy Elliott under then-Supt. Ramon C. Cortines. If successful, it will probably be expanded districtwide by Supt. John Deasy.

Jefferson High, south of downtown, started the grade-incentive program on its own last year. The low-achieving campus had been on the verge of being handed over to an outside organization, but Taft and his faculty retained control of their campus with a reform plan that they now have to carry out.

About 400 of 1,600 Jefferson students earned one or more improved grades last year. Taft expects that number to increase, as a

result of this and other initiatives. Only teachers are allowed to change a student's grade, and some initially resisted, Taft said. They didn't want to bail out a student who hadn't put forth effort in class.

Critics say such incentives are ineffective or unseemly or that they exacerbate an over-emphasis on standardized tests.

"The predictable consequence will be even more teaching to the test in order to boost scores and grades, with a resulting decline in educational breadth and quality," said Robert Schaeffer of the Massachusetts-based National Center for Fair & Open Testing.

As a rule, incentive programs don't violate state law, said John Boivin, who oversees testing for the state education department. Anecdotally, he's heard concerns about how inflated grades could affect competition for admission to colleges.

At Jefferson, Anthony Vasquez raised his ninth-grade geography grade from a B to an A. This year, the 10th-grader hopes to improve his history grade from a C to a B.

"I thought the tests weren't important," Vasquez said. "Now that they did this, I thought, 'I'm going to try hard on this one.'" He said he also studied more in class leading up to the test.

Ultimately, incentives provide only temporary benefits, said Alfie Kohn, author of "Punished by Rewards," who has reviewed relevant research. "The more you reward people for doing something, the more they tend to lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward."

Eric Hanushek, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, characterized the results as mixed: "Sometimes it looks like kids respond and other times they don't."

"If you have something like this that will motivate a subset of kids, you probably should do it," he said.

In New York, the performance of students on state Regents exams in five subject areas is linked directly to earning a diploma.

The L.A. Unified plan also applies to Advanced Placement tests, which are nationally administered. L.A. Unified students who take AP classes already benefit from "weighted grades," meaning that they receive more points per class, which can significantly raise grade-point averages. Under the new plan, a "passing" score on the college-level AP exams will allow students to achieve an automatic A in that course.

"It gives us the opportunity to get that A we wanted," said Scott Sadeghian, a junior at Polytechnic High in Sun Valley. He's muscling through five AP classes. "These courses are pretty rigorous and we do try."

But paying cash for performance — an idea being tried in Chicago, Dallas, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere — would go too far, said students and teachers interviewed at the two schools.

"If you pay students to get good grades," said Poly junior Javier Castillo, "they might view education as merely a way to get money."

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New York City: Tests for Pupils, But the Grades Go to Teachers

New York Times

By: Sharon Otterman

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http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/24/education/24tests.html?_r=3&ref=education

New York City education officials are developing more than a dozen new standardized tests, but in a sign of the times, their main purpose will be to grade teachers, not the students who take them.

Elementary school students would most likely take at least one or two additional tests every year, beginning in the third grade. High school students could take up to eight additional tests a year, and middle school students would also have extra tests. These would be in addition to the state English, math and Regents exams that students already take.

The exams, which would begin rolling out as early as next academic year, are being created as part of a statewide overhaul of how teachers are evaluated. Under a law passed last year that helped the state win \$700 million in a federal grant competition, known as Race to the Top, each school district must find a way to evaluate teachers on a scale from "ineffective" to "highly effective," with teachers facing potential firing if they are rated ineffective for two years in a row.

Under the law, 40 percent of a teacher's grade will be based on standardized tests or other "rigorous, comparable" measures of student performance. Half of that should be based on state tests, and half on measures selected by local districts. The remaining 60 percent is to be based on more subjective measures, including principal observations.

Most districts will not create their own standardized tests, an expensive process that requires considerable expertise. The state

does not require them to do so, instead permitting districts to set academic goals for teachers, broadly defined.

But New York City, which has made standardized tests a centerpiece of its school reform efforts, is pushing ahead. The city schools system is planning to use up to one-quarter of its \$256 million share of the federal grant money for as many as 16 new standardized exams to cover science, math, social studies and English in the 3rd through 12th grades.

City officials want their tests to be different from the mostly multiple choice tests the state uses. A proposal given to testing companies for bids in April asks that the exams be based around tasks, like asking students to progress through a multistep math problem, modify a science experiment to get a different result, or write a persuasive essay. They should also reflect the more rigorous [Common Core academic standards](#) that New York and other states have adopted.

“How do you create an additional assessment that is actually going to strengthen instructional practice, rather than divert time away from instruction?” said Shael Polakow-Suransky, the city’s chief academic officer. “That is what we set out to solve.”

Despite the city’s optimism, the prospect of more tests, particularly ones that will have a direct influence on teachers, is causing dismay among those who believe that students already spend too much time preparing for exams and not enough on the broader goals of education, like social and emotional development.

“We are not focusing on teaching and learning anymore; we are focusing on collecting data,” said Lisa B. Donlan, a parent in Manhattan who has advocated against standardized testing.

Many tests, according to the latest thinking of the department, would be given in two parts — a pre-test early in the year, and a post-test at the end, to gauge how much the student learned from a teacher. Proposals from companies were due May 9.

Daniel Koretz, a professor of education and a testing expert at Harvard University, expressed concern with the proposed design of the new tests. “When you give kids complicated tasks to do, performance tends to be quite inconsistent from one task to the next,” Dr. Koretz said. That makes it hard to use the test to draw broader conclusions about how much a student is learning, unless the test is long enough to include many tasks, he said.

Other states, including Kentucky, tried similar tests, Dr. Koretz said, but abandoned them, partly because they could not compare results from year to year. Teachers were also having their students practice the particular skills they knew would be tested, meaning the exam was measuring test preparation, not necessarily broader learning, which became an issue in New York’s state standardized tests.

“The evidence is strong that you can inflate scores on performance tasks,” he said, urging that the city at least try out the tests for a year or two before they count for teachers.

The city has not worked out how it will measure student progress in subjects like art or physical education, a challenge the state is also facing. It has not yet asked the teachers’ union to weigh in on what the tests will be, surprising union officials, because their consent is needed under the teacher evaluation law before the exams can be used.

“Before you start spending all this money on this, if you don’t want to waste it, you have to come to an agreement with us,” said Michael Mulgrew, the president of the United Federation of Teachers.

Mr. Polakow-Suransky said each test would most likely last a class period or two, and ideally be similar to a regular classroom assignment. Teachers, knowing that up to 20 percent of their annual rating would depend on how well their students do, might teach to these tests, but because they test higher-order thinking skills, that could actually strengthen instruction, he said.

If the union approves, and testing companies can act quickly, the city wants to introduce the tests in 100 schools next academic year, 500 the following year and almost all of city’s nearly 1,700 schools by 2013-14. It has begun a pilot at 11 struggling schools already receiving federal assistance.

At Chelsea Career and Technical High School in Manhattan, where teachers tried out an algebra exam, Margaret Glendis, the math assistant principal, said she liked what she saw — an hour-and-a-half test with only five multipart problems, each of which got harder in gradual steps.

Rather than testing content alone, Ms. Glendis said, “it’s about the kid being brave enough to tackle something when they don’t know where they are going to end up.”

She did not tell students that the main reason for these tests was to grade the teachers, nor did teachers at Flushing High School in Queens, which tested four sample exams.

Mr. Polakow-Suransky encouraged transparency between teachers and students when they are administered for real. “I don’t think that it should be a secret that part of how teachers are evaluated is how kids’ learning goes in their class,” he said.

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