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NATIONAL NEWS

Opinion: School Choice is Here to Stay

Wall Street Journal

By: Richard Komer

August 29, 2011

http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111904787404576532201473726910.html?mod=WSJ_Opinion_LEFTTopOpinion

The 2010 elections had many obvious effects, but one of the lesser-known is that they revived the school-choice movement in a big way. Although many education writers had assumed the movement was dead, there have been far more efforts to pass school-choice programs this year than ever and, more importantly, the success rate has gone up too.

This reflects the political nature of school choice, which has in modern times been promoted primarily by Republicans. Increasingly, however, Democrats, particularly minority Democrats, have begun bucking the wishes of the national teachers unions, which oppose school choice in any form.

School choice has even broken into the national consciousness with the success of such documentaries as "The Lottery" and "Waiting for 'Superman.'" These focused on parents' efforts to get their children into charter schools, which are public schools operated independently of their local school districts—and, not coincidentally, without teacher union involvement.

From the perspective of status quo supporters, charter schools are the least threatening form of school choice, because they remain public schools, meaning they cannot charge tuition and their admissions practices typically are controlled by lottery. This year has seen dramatic increases in interest in charter schools, as an alternative to regular public schools. Even the Obama administration got into the act, by making the removal of existing caps on the number of charter schools a component of states' applications for federal "Race to the Top" funds.

More threatening to the status quo are scholarship programs that allow parents to choose private schools for their children, with the scholarships either funded by the states or generated by offering individuals and corporations tax credits for donations to privately operated scholarship funds. Although scholarship programs like federal Pell Grants, the G.I. Bill and similar state programs are common at the postsecondary level, so far similar programs have rarely been enacted for K-12 education, where monopolistic public-school systems are the norm. After the Democrats' success in the 2008 elections, the newly emboldened allies of the teachers unions launched attacks on several of the existing programs.

For example, the U.S. Congress and the Obama administration doomed the only federal K-12 program, the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program, to a slow and lingering death in 2009 by refusing to allow the enrollment of any new students. This despite the program's success, proven by a federal study, and local political support (the salient exception being D.C.'s Congressional delegate, Eleanor Holmes Norton).

In 2009 in Wisconsin, the newly elected Democratic General Assembly joined with then Democratic Gov. Jim Doyle to reduce

per capita funding for the nation's first modern scholarship program, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, and to impose burdensome new regulations to discourage continued participation by the private schools. In Pennsylvania, before leaving office in January Democratic Gov. Ed Rendell pushed through a substantial reduction in corporate tax credits available for donations to that state's Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC), causing a reduction in the number of scholarships awarded to fewer than 39,000 from over 45,000, and driving many students back into the public schools.

Thanks to the 2010 elections, however, many of these antichoice efforts have been reversed. Due to the leadership of House Speaker John Boehner, the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program has been reauthorized and is expanding again. Gov. Scott Walker and the Wisconsin legislature have expanded the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program to a second city, Racine, and removed the cap on the number of Milwaukee students who can receive scholarships.

Although Pennsylvania failed to pass a new scholarship bill to help support school choice, Indiana passed what could become the largest such program in the nation, offering private-school scholarships to qualifying families statewide. Oklahoma passed a statewide tax-credit scholarship program, and Arizona enacted a new program called Empowerment Savings Accounts for special-education students. Although most of these K-12 programs are for poor children in the public-school system, even a relatively affluent school district in Colorado has created a pilot program for 500 students to attend the private schools of their choice.

The teachers unions and their allies have sought to kill several of these new school-choice initiatives already by challenging them in the courts. But any legal defeats will only motivate renewed effort on the part of school-choice advocates. The recent history of the movement shows that despite temporary setbacks, school choice is now here to stay.

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States Search for Answers to Cheating Scandals

National Public Radio

By: Larry Abramson

August 28, 2011

<http://www.npr.org/2011/08/28/139941424/states-search-for-answers-to-cheating-scandals?ft=1&f=1013>

Cheating scandals have rocked a number of school districts across the country this year. The publicity is pushing states to look for better ways to detect and prevent tampering with the test results, and some say constant vigilance is required to guard against cheating.

What happened in Atlanta is hard to imagine: Dozens of administrators and teachers apparently conspired to change answers on standardized tests. When those tests showed big gains, school leaders took the credit. But they were caught, in part, because Georgia investigators have been looking for signs of tampering for years.

Kathleen Mathers, who runs Georgia's Office of Student Achievement, says her state is in its third year of using erasure analysis of all elementary and middle school tests. Mathers says that concerns about testing led the state to ask test designer McGraw Hill to look extra closely at those No. 2 pencil marks.

She says the company's scanners can differentiate "between an answer choice that is definitely made and intended to be the answer choice, and answer choices that were previously made and then erased."

Mathers says that analysis cost the state about \$27,000 — a small fraction of its testing budget. The data established that in many schools there were just too many switches from wrong to right.

Hard To Detect

That information alone is just the start, says testing forensics expert John Fremer. "The best thing to do is looking for unusual agreement among test takers."

Fremer runs Caveon Test Security, which has helped Atlanta and Washington, D.C., investigate suspicious incidents. He says if every student is getting the same answer right or the same answer wrong, then something might be going on.

Investigators also look for unusual spikes in test scores, he says. Sometimes there's a good explanation for that improvement. Fremer says cheating is hard to detect because despite recent scandals, it is still very rare.

"Only 1 or 2 percent, maybe, of educators don't follow the rules," he says.

Pennsylvania is currently looking into patterns of unusual erasures or jumps in achievement.

But not every state follows up on that initial erasure analysis as vigorously as Georgia did. That probe involved involved dozens of investigators across state government.

Some say educators tampering with kids' futures may actually become more common.

The Consequences Of Not Passing

Professor Gary Miron of Western Michigan University says this problem is part of the troubled legacy of No Child Left Behind. The law said test scores would determine the fate of entire schools.

Schools that fail can be shut down, and bad test scores can also jeopardize funding. And now a growing number of states are planning to evaluate teachers based in part on test scores.

Miron says before No Child Left Behind, schools tested less often and more carefully.

"No Child Left Behind required testing to be rolled out at each of the grades between grades three and eight," he says. "But with this it meant that we had to distribute the resources for testing across more grades."

Miron says that leaves less money to check for tampering.

But others in the field say scrutiny of test results costs only a fraction of testing budgets and should be considered part of the cost of doing business.

Fremer of Caveon Test Security has built a business on this assumption.

"You're not going to be able to run a state testing program without doing comprehensive analyses of the results," he says. "I mean that ship has already sailed."

Most states have joined in an effort to establish a common national curriculum and, eventually, a common set of tests.

They hope to administer most tests by computer, which could make it tougher to tamper with results or force investigators to develop a new set of tools to find and stop cheating on standardized tests.

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FLORIDA NEWS

Florida: Thousands of Palm Beach students take classes online

Palm Beach Post

By: Jason Schultz

August 27, 2011

<http://www.palmbeachpost.com/news/schools/thousands-of-palm-beach-county-students-take-classes-1800835.html>

When school started last week, thousands of students in Palm Beach County sat down at a computer screen for at least part of the day rather than in a classroom. At least some of them, like 11-year-old Matthew Barnes and 8-year-old Vincent Barnes of Boca Raton, sat at computers in their homes to take classes.

"We do almost all the same things they do in a regular school, only we are able to concentrate more because we don't have any distractions," said Matthew, a sixth-grader.

They are part of the Palm Beach County School District's growing online program called Palm Beach Virtual School, which district officials hope will alleviate crowding and help schools meet state-mandated class-size limits.

"We're encouraging students on a very wide scale to consider taking virtual classes," said Debra Johnson, the principal of Palm Beach Virtual School, a system of online classes offered to children between kindergarten and 12th grade.

Students can go to school full-time online at home, take virtual classes part-time at home, or use a computer lab at a school and still attend regular classes, Johnson said.

Last year there were 257 students taking online classes full-time. She estimated that this school year there will be at least 100 more full-time students.

There are thousands of public and private school students taking extra classes online, Johnson said. During the summer, she said, more than 3,000 Palm Beach County students took part-time online classes.

That works well for the school district, which is required to meet state-mandated limits on the size of core classes, such as English and math, or else face fines as high as \$16 million.

When school board members approved a roughly \$18.9 million plan to meet class-size limits this school year, one of the many solutions they included was increasing the use of virtual school, said Chief Financial Officer Mike Burke. Students taking a class online do not take up classroom slots.

Johnson said principals are marketing virtual school to parents as an option for their children.

The legislature also passed a requirement this year that every high school student has to take at least one online class to

graduate, she said, which also should drive up enrollment.

Emerald Cove Middle School in Wellington is one of several schools that has built or expanded a computer lab in the past three years, making it easier for students on campus to take virtual classes. Principal Nancy Lucas said her new lab can hold 30 to 35 students.

The lab will have a person who will help students with any computer problems, but the students, whether working in the lab or at home, all have a "virtual teacher" who teaches the class online. Students communicate with their teachers by instant message, email or telephone.

"One of the first things we have to get students used to is that we are real," said Sarah Mammolito, a former Bak Middle School of the Arts teacher who is now a virtual teacher of middle and high school science online. "When you call me, it is just like raising your hand."

Mammolito said most of the 150 students she teaches a year online are taking virtual classes full-time.

A few others are private school students who are taking an online class not offered at their school. The classes are free to all Florida residents.

The parents of the child act as learning coaches at home to help their child through the lessons. Virginia Barnes, the mother of Matthew and Vincent, said she often helps guide her children. She grades their work and enters their results into the computer.

Lois Spatz of Wellington said her son, Wellington High sophomore Shawn Spatz, took a social studies class online this summer so that he could fit a second band class into his regular schedule this year. Spatz said it was the level of direct contact with the virtual teacher that impressed her. She said she probably will let her son take one or two more virtual classes throughout high school so he can continue to take extra band classes.

"Right away she had a conference call with the two of us," Spatz said. "She even gave me her cellphone number."

School officials said they hope to be able to sell more parents on the notion of their children taking virtual classes full- or part-time despite what Johnson said is a tiny publicity budget.

Vincent Barnes, a third-grader, said he has a simple pitch for the district to use.

"If you want to sell it to parents, just tell them you'll have more time to love your kids," he said.

School in cyberspace

More than 350 public school students are expected to take full-time online classes this year, with many more taking classes part-time.

More than 3,000 students took some online classes during the summer.

Classes are free to all public and private school Florida residents.

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New school year fosters new attitude at Gulf Highlands Elementary

St. Petersburg Times

By: Jeffery Solochek

August 28, 2011

<http://www.tampabay.com/news/education/k12/new-school-year-fosters-new-attitude-at-gulf-highlands-elementary/1188386>

PORT RICHEY — Kara Smucker sought a fresh start for the new school year.

As students streamed in for the first day of classes at Gulf Highlands Elementary, they were greeted by staffers in powder blue shirts that read "Believe."

"We are showing that we believe in them," said Smucker, the principal, as she welcomed the kids. "We want to inspire them. We have a united front for their success."

Everyone wants a quick turnaround for the school, which received an F grade from the state for last school year.

"Teachers have been working all summer long," fourth-grade teacher Erin Alford said. "After the grade came out, we were in a panic."

Smucker took over in July, and her can-do attitude and concrete recommendations offered a reassuring first step. Even state

Department of Education officials assigned to help the school have heaped praise on Smucker and the direction she's taking Gulf Highlands.

A full team from the DOE accountability division will spend two days at the school, beginning Monday, to conduct an instructional review. The goal is to provide ongoing support toward change that will stick.

"Our role is not to come in and say, 'You are doing this, this and this wrong and you need to fix it,' " said Fred Heid, school improvement bureau chief. "We want to focus on those things that can help the school have ... substantive and sustainable improvement."

He noted the school had poor scores in the math and reading portions of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. He anticipated that much focus will be on helping teachers find ways to more effectively reach students.

It will require everyone to examine their performance in key areas such as presenting lessons, handling kids and writing tests. It won't necessarily be an easy conversation, Heid said.

But it's one the school is ready to embark upon.

Smucker began the conversations even before teachers officially came to work.

She hosted a session for teachers on creating a classroom environment conducive to learning and student participation. Twenty people came for the first one. Seven showed for the second.

During the hourlong interactive presentation, Smucker and new assistant principal Keri Allen demonstrated instructional games and discussed how a room would require different types of spaces, such as an open gathering area, to accommodate them.

They also put forth five expectations for each classroom: a reading-themed bulletin board, an area to celebrate students, seating designed for structured collaboration, a meeting area, and a display of student work.

The teachers left with plenty of ideas and validation of some past strategies. Afterward, they peppered Smucker with questions. Many were small but telling, such as whether they could move white boards and what type of gradebook they could use.

Smucker shook her head.

"People get frustrated about my leadership," she said. "I am more about having conversations. People say, 'Just tell me the answer.' I say, No. This is *our* school. ... It's a collective effort in decisionmaking. I don't tell you what to do a lot."

She did have some expectations, though. She wants everyone to reflect on why they're at Gulf Highlands, and to determine what the disconnect might be between their reasons and their outcomes.

"We need to have the conversation about what is keeping us from getting there," Smucker said.

She wants a pervasive belief that all students can perform, and that it's up to teachers to find the ways to success. And she's made a few reading assignments aimed at getting that attitude in place.

Smucker also made some functional changes to the school, such as a revamped master schedule that puts a stronger focus on reading lessons, with plans to implement more.

Teachers welcomed the new direction.

"I think we have an excellent program," said kindergarten teacher Debi Wolfe, who has taught at Gulf Highlands since it opened six years ago. "Mrs. Smucker is really motivational. I think we're going to make great progress. ... We really do believe we are going to have a great year and we're going to have fun while we do it."

Parents dropping off their children had high hopes, as well — whether they were bothered by the school's F grade or not.

"Honestly, the F grade didn't concern me," said Jessica Primo, a PTO mom with three kids at the school. "I am hoping that our children get better grades this year, but I really don't hold much in the FCAT. I put more in the teachers and how involved they are with the kids. And they are very involved."

Lisa Monaco, who registered her son Riley for kindergarten days before classes started, didn't know about the F, but had some concerns about the school's high level of poverty, and how it might affect learning. Her few visits to the campus gave her high hopes.

"We love it so far," Monaco said. "I see that people are very hands-on. ... If the staff can show us they've got what it takes, I'm all for it."

They got a no-nonsense start.

With the first bell still fading, Smucker said it was time to get going. "Parents," she said, "make your goodbyes so our

instruction can begin."

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Virtual learners thrive at home – bullies are absent

Palm Beach Post

By: Jason Schultz

August 27, 2011

<http://www.palmbeachpost.com/news/schools/virtual-learners-thrive-at-home-bullies-are-absent-1800834.html>

BOCA RATON — During the first week of school, Matthew and Vincent Barnes slept past 7 a.m. every day, had a commute that lasted about 15 seconds and got to learn about math and world history alongside their mother, Virginia Barnes, and their dog, Sally.

They are two of the more than 350 Palm Beach County public school students taking full-time online classes at home through the Palm Beach County Virtual School system. .

Matthew, 11, prefers taking online classes at home rather than attending a public school.

"There is so much more pressure at a regular school," he said.

Vincent also said it's less stressful because the brothers get their work done faster and don't have extra homework in the evenings.

Virginia Barnes, who acts as her children's learning coach, guiding them through lessons and grading some of their work, said she put them in virtual school because it allows her to keep track of their progress.

"I am really in tune and know what they are doing," she said. "If there is a tough spot, we see it right away and address it."

On Friday morning, Vincent and his mother made their way through an online lesson on ancient Greece while Matthew worked on algebraic expressions.

Vincent said one of the major advantages of online classes is that he doesn't have to worry about being bullied .

Virginia Barnes remembers being bullied at times in middle school. She said she's glad her children can study without such distractions.

Barnes said most people who ask about the virtual classes wonder if the children get enough social interaction with other children.

But Matthew said he plays violin in an orchestra in his spare time and hangs out with friends, so he feels just like any other child .

"It's not like I don't have any kind of social life or anything," he said. "I have plenty of friends."

Barnes said she lets her children help her decide each year whether to keep going with virtual classes. Both said they are happy, though Matthew is pondering regular classes when he gets to high school.

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STATE NEWS

Indiana school voucher program cheered, criticized

USA Today

By: Scott Elliott

August 29, 2011

<http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/story/2011-08-28/Ind-school-voucher-program-cheered-criticized/50169064/1>

Single mother Heather Coffy faced a tough decision: return her son to a public school where he struggled academically or fall behind on her monthly mortgage payments to keep him and her two other children in private Catholic schools where they were flourishing.

In April, the Indiana Legislature provided another option — vouchers that allow low-and middle-income families to use public funds to help pay private school tuition.

The Indiana school voucher program — the nation's second statewide program — has been a boon to parents such as Coffy and to more than 240 religious schools, most Catholic, now eligible to receive public funds.

But the law, which allows families to redirect money from the school district in which their children reside to private schools, is being contested and sharply criticized by public school officials and the state teachers' union, who contend that vouchers offer a stealth subsidy for religious schools and drain critical funds from already cash-poor public schools.

Opponents have filed a lawsuit alleging it violates the Indiana constitution's required separation of church and state. They say the early numbers bear that out: All but six of the 242 non-public schools so far approved for the voucher program have religious affiliations.

"I think the intent is that the money will be going to religious institutions or private institutions to fund those children's educations, and so that is a voucher program funding religious education," said Teresa Meredith, Indiana State Teachers Association vice president and a plaintiff in the lawsuit.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Bennett said the initial voucher numbers simply reflect the fact that the vast majority of Indiana private schools are religious.

Regardless of the initial result, Bennett said, the intent is not to subsidize religious schools.

"We are subsidizing the education of children," he said, "in the schools where parents want those children to attend."

That's the case with Indianapolis mother Coffy, who is not Catholic. She said the decision to keep her children in Catholic schools was solely about academics — her son was failing in public school before she moved him and her two other children to private Catholic schools. "I really wanted what was best for him," she said.

Before Indiana's voucher program was approved, Coffy said her plan for this school year was to pay only the interest on her mortgage to save enough money to cover tuition.

"I was going to keep my children in private school no matter what," she said. "Now I can pay my full mortgage this month."

Religion was a major factor in Sarah Masquelier's decision to sign up for the voucher program. The Indianapolis woman said she has long wanted a Christian school for her children but could not afford it. Instead, she tried just about everything else in pursuit of a quality education, including a charter school and home-schooling. Vouchers will allow the two oldest of her five children to attend Kingsway Christian School in Avon, an Indianapolis suburb.

"I've always been researching options for schools," she said, "because I never have been very satisfied with the public schools."

Whatever their motivations, families have been flocking to the program since it was launched less than two months ago.

State officials report 3,259 students have enrolled so far, which eclipses the first-year enrollment in Ohio, home of the USA's only other statewide voucher system. Ohio's program attracted 2,713 students its first year in 2007, according to the [Ohio Department of Education](#) website.

Indiana's program, which is still accepting applications, also topped first-year enrollment in a similar program in Milwaukee, which introduced a large-scale voucher system in 1991. Milwaukee's program began with just 337 students its first year before growing to more than 19,000 last year, according to the Milwaukee School Choice Program website.

Indiana has a cap of 7,500 vouchers this year and no more than 15,000 next year. The cap will be lifted in 2013 and there will be no limit on the number of students who can obtain vouchers, according to the Indiana Department of Education.

The program is drawing in students from urban centers such as Indianapolis, [Fort Wayne](#) and Evansville and rural districts and small towns, data show. Fifteen percent of voucher recipients live in small towns and rural districts.

The financial impact on Indiana Public Schools so far been is relatively small — \$2.5 million to \$3 million, or about 1% of its \$290 million budget. But Superintendent Eugene White said it is one more blow to the financially strapped district.

"It simply means we are going to have to cut our budget another \$3 million," White said.

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Idaho Education Board committee Oks online classes

Associated Press

By: Staff

August 29, 2011

<http://washingtonexaminer.com/news/2011/08/idaho-ed-board-committee-oks-online-classes>

A subcommittee of the Idaho State Board of Education has voted in favor of requiring high school students to complete two online courses before they can graduate.

The recommendation from the subcommittee now goes before the full board.

The Spokesman-Review (<http://bit.ly/r34rqO>) reports that the subcommittee approved the new rule on a 6-2 vote — despite overwhelming opposition from stakeholders who testified at seven public hearings around the state. Only eight of the 76 people who testified at the hearings or submitted written comments supported the new rule.

If the full board approves the online-class graduation requirement, it would affect the class of 2016.

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Oklahoma: Education Department tackles outdated technology

Tulsa World

By: Gennie Graham

August 29, 2011

http://www.tulsaworld.com/news/article.aspx?subjectid=19&articleid=20110829_11_A1_Onherf554901

On her first day as state superintendent, Janet Barresi spent 20 minutes trying to find an email a staffer had sent earlier.

"That's 20 minutes that I'll never have back," Barresi said.

That search was indicative of larger technology barriers that Barresi needed to tear down.

Within the first six months of taking office, she has set a course to completely restructure the department's technology - from employee voice mail to public access for analyzing education data.

"I wanted to be absolutely sure we move from a regulatory agency to a service organization," Barresi said. "In order to do that, we must have the capability to have a communication plan and an entire system able to handle that."

A State Auditor and Inspector's Office report released in June 2010 criticized the structure of the agency's technology department, stating it "creates a high risk of fraud and/or waste."

The report stated: "There needs to be continuing education to ensure that one individual does not have too many critical responsibilities."

'We'll focus on education'

The audit coincided with an effort by the Office of State Finance to consolidate information technology services of all state agencies under one umbrella.

In May, Gov. Mary Fallin signed into law House Bill 1304, which mandated the consolidation and restructuring of the state's technology infrastructure under the authority of the state's chief information officer located in the Office of State Finance.

Some agencies are fighting the mandate by seeking exemptions. But the Education Department dove in immediately.

Oklahoma Chief Information Officer Alex Pettit, who was appointed in April 2010, said Barresi wanted to go beyond his original proposal to shore up gaps.

"Dr. Barresi said you take the whole thing and make it more efficient," Pettit said. "She said you focus on technology and we'll focus on education. ... This is really not an information technology story - this is about leadership transformation of a department."

A 142-page comprehensive plan has been created detailing the steps.

The starting point includes a mainframe system for personnel installed in 1964, an email system that didn't allow for saving and archiving and a student information network implemented by Tandem, which went out of business in 1997 when it was bought by another company.

The first move was to shift the technology staff from the Education Department to the Office of State Finance. That includes 17 employees and 15 contract employees whose contracts are being reviewed.

About one-third of the employees left their jobs rather than move to another agency.

Barresi said the lack of up-to-date technology was impeding planning and communication.

"Silos had formed, and there was not efficient communication - no communication with each other and with districts," Barresi said. "It was causing districts to have duplication of information to have to input. It was the No. 1 complaint I heard from districts. There wasn't any cross-planning."

Eventually, the department would like to use email and other media for notifications to districts.

"Every single directive that went out to districts went through snail mail," Barresi said. "My first day on the job I said, 'No more

snail mail. Everything goes out on email.' ... This was a very paper-driven environment, and we are moving toward paperless."

The agency projects a savings of \$650,000 in this current year and more than \$4 million in savings during the next six years.

Federal stimulus money is covering most of the one-time costs, Pettit said.

"The superintendent plans to utilize technology and leveraging more than has been done in the past," he said.

"We can't flip a switch and make it all change at once. We will get in place and then we will be able to refine," he said.

'Standardize, centralize and professionalize'

Education Department spokesman Damon Gardenhire said the agency's website was identified early as a priority to redesign and use as a tool for transparency.

The plethora of education data available to the public includes test scores, drop-out rates, enrollment, staff numbers, racial/ethnic breakdowns and budgets.

But the data found online is usually in a view-only mode and located under different links. Sometimes, an open records request is required to gain the information.

"We need to make data accessible and easier to find," Gardenhire said. "Instead of having a PDF to view information, why not put information in a form so anyone from the public or media can download it into a spreadsheet to analyze how they want? The website is not user friendly, and it has to change."

Two years ago, 15 percent of Oklahoma school districts did not have a website, according to a report by the Oklahomans for Responsible Government. It also noted that no district met the 10 criteria used to determine effective transparency and communication.

A pilot project with Google to test its Google Apps for Education is under way, as well as some other platforms and open-source programs for local districts.

"This is real savings. Our goal is to standardize, centralize and professionalize," Gardenhire said.

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