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NATIONAL NEWS

Opinion: The Year of School Choice

Wall Street Journal

By: Editorial Board

July 3, 2011

http://professional.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304450604576420330972531442.html?mod=WSJ_hpp_sections_opinion&mg=reno-wsj

No fewer than 13 states have passed major education reforms

School may be out for the summer, but school choice is in, as states across the nation have moved to expand education opportunities for disadvantaged kids. This year is shaping up as the best for reformers in a very long time.

No fewer than 13 states have enacted school choice legislation in 2011, and 28 states have legislation pending. Last month alone, Louisiana enhanced its state income tax break for private school tuition; Ohio tripled the number of students eligible for school vouchers; and North Carolina passed a law letting parents of students with special needs claim a tax credit for expenses related to private school tuition and other educational services.

Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker made headlines this year for taking on government unions. Less well known is that last month he signed a bill that removes the cap of 22,500 on the number of kids who can participate in Milwaukee's Parental Choice Program, the nation's oldest voucher program, and creates a new school choice initiative for families in Racine County. "We now have 13 programs new or expanded this year alone" in the state, says Susan Meyers of the Wisconsin-based Foundation for Educational Choice.

School choice proponents may have had their biggest success in Indiana, where Republican Governor Mitch Daniels signed legislation that removes the charter cap, allows all universities to be charter authorizers, and creates a voucher program that enables about half the state's students to attend public or private schools.

Florida, Georgia and Oklahoma have created or expanded tuition tax credit programs. North Carolina and Tennessee eliminated caps on the number of charter schools. Maine passed its first charter law. Colorado created a voucher program in Douglas County that will provide scholarships for private schools. In Utah, lawmakers passed the Statewide Online Education Program, which allows high school students to access course work on the Internet from public or private schools anywhere in the state. Even in the nation's capital, and thanks largely to House Speaker John Boehner, Congress revived the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, a voucher program for poor families that the Obama Administration had wanted to kill at the behest of teachers unions.

One notable exception is Pennsylvania, where Governor Tom Corbett and the Republican state legislature bungled passage of a state-wide voucher bill. Mr. Corbett promised during his election campaign last year that he'd make the reform a priority. Instead, Republican legislative leaders dithered for most of the spring, and Mr. Corbett got engaged very late. The session ended last week without passage of the voucher bill and several other school choice measures, including an increase in charter school authorizers. The Pennsylvania State Education Association is no doubt delighted by the failure.

Choice by itself won't lift U.S. K-12 education to where it needs to be. Eliminating teacher tenure and measuring teachers against student performance are also critical. Standards must be higher than they are.

But choice is essential to driving reform because it erodes the union-dominated monopoly that assigns children to schools based on where they live. Unions defend the monopoly to protect jobs for their members, but education should above all serve students and the larger goal of a society in which everyone has an opportunity to prosper.

This year's choice gains are a major step forward, and they are due in large part to Republican gains in last fall's elections combined with growing recognition by many Democrats that the unions are a reactionary force that is denying opportunity to millions. The ultimate goal should be to let the money follow the children to whatever school their parents want them to attend.

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NEA's Delegates Approve Obama Endorsement, Dues Increase

Education Week

By: Stephen Sawchuk

July 4, 2011

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/teacherbeat/2011/07/neas_delegates_approve_obama_e.html

[Despite a lot of hand-wringing](#), delegates to the National Education Association's Representative Assembly approved [an early endorsement](#) for President Barack Obama, and by a good margin: 5,414 delegates, or 72.04 percent, voted in favor, according to results that were just released here.

It looks like [I was right after all](#). (The measure required a 58 percent "yes" vote in order to pass.)

The approval triggers the flow of NEA PAC dollars toward Obama's re-election campaign.

And that's not all: 70.1 percent of the body, or 5,258 delegates, approved the amendment to the bylaws that authorize the \$10-per-member annual assessment, 60 percent of which will be used primarily to support the Ballot Measure/Legislative Crisis fund, and the other 40 percent for national and state media campaigns. These funds can't support campaigns but can support messaging and action against things like anti-collective bargaining legislation.

There was some real doubt about whether the Obama endorsement was going to go through this year or next; I spoke to a number of delegates who did not particularly want to go forward with an endorsement right now, figuring they'd have more leverage with the president if the endorsement was delayed until next year's RA.

And at least a few felt that the NEA should call for the removal of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan as the price for an early Obama endorsement—the delegates earlier approved a measure listing [13 frustrations](#) with the secretary—but the call for Duncan's ouster [didn't come to pass](#).

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NEA Passes Teacher-Evaluation Policy, With a Catch-22 on Test Scores

Education Week

By: Stephen Sawchuk

July 4, 2011

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/teacherbeat/2011/07/nea_passes_teacher_evaluation.html

The National Education Association just approved a policy statement on teacher evaluation theoretically permitting use of standardized-test scores as one measure of teacher performance—but the union's leaders underscored that no existing standardized tests currently meet the criteria for inclusion spelled out in the policy.

The move was urged by the union's leaders as a way of putting forth a coherent vision for the place of evaluations in promoting teacher effectiveness. It amends all the union's current resolutions dealing with teacher evaluations, support, and due process.

As Teacher Beat reported earlier, the union's board of directors [put many qualifications on the use of test scores in teacher evaluations](#) even before delegates got a whack at the proposal.

In introducing the proposal, NEA Secretary-Treasurer Becky Pringle made it clear that the NEA's main focus is on teacher improvement. "The decision is whether we will define a truly high-quality evaluation and accountability system that honors our profession," she said.

Given that no existing tests currently meet the requirements as stated, she said the union would engage in "ongoing work to ensure they are created."

On the convention floor, delegates added a few additional amendments. Let's take a look at them:

- Objective evaluators must now "be agreed to by the local affiliate," which would, for example, not permit evaluators like the district-hired "master educators" used by the District of Columbia's [IMPACT teacher-evaluation system](#).
- On tenure-granting (or as the union calls it "career status"), the original proposal said that teachers after receiving two "meets" or "exceeds" ratings on evaluations should earn tenure. But the final version says tenure should be granted for a good evaluation

"at the end of their probationary period."

- On top of all the other requirements, standardized tests used in evaluations would now have to be "developmentally appropriate," too.

Strong statements both pro and con during the debate on this item. Here's a delegate from Michigan, speaking on behalf of his state's delegation:

"It is disturbing that the largest labor union in the U.S., the largest teachers' union 3.2-million members is flipping on this position. ... Standardized tests narrow our curriculum. Standardized tests are not an accurate measure of teacher performance or student achievement."

And here's Ken Swanson, president of the Illinois Education Association, speaking on behalf of the union's board of directors, in favor of adoption:

"We act on many things every year at the RA. Some are somewhat trivial, some are important, some are profound. But occasionally we act on something that fundamentally charts the course of the organization and fundamentally changes the national debate about public education. This is one of those items. This is a change to get off of defense and start playing offense. ... Now it the moment, now is the opportunity. ... It is time to act. It is time for us to talk about what makes for effective teaching and effective evaluation."

An interesting subtext also emerged during the debate. A few education support personnel were not happy that the statement does not reference how they should be evaluated.

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FLORIDA NEWS

Opinion: No schools left behind

Orlando Sentinel

By: Editorial Board

July 5, 2011

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/opinion/os-ed-education-commissioner-070511-20110701.0.2574099.story>

New education commissioner mustn't forget public schools remain critical in educational equation

Rick Scott hasn't always been forthcoming about his plans for Florida. Yet, no one could accuse him of playing it close to the vest on school choice.

From the campaign trail, Scott was clear. Charter schools — the private schools funded by public dollars, but free of many of the rules governing traditional public schools — would be a priority. So would expanding homeschooling and virtual education.

Thus, his hand in the hiring last month of Florida's new commissioner of education wasn't particularly surprising. Scott wheedled members of the state Board of Education to tap Gerard Robinson as the replacement for Eric Smith, who announced his resignation in March.

In Robinson, fished from a pool of 26 candidates, Scott would have had to call Central Casting to find a more like-minded actor to star in his conservative program to recast Florida education.

But Robinson must not neglect public schools, still the leading destination for the state's students.

The former Virginia education commissioner arrives with shiny school-choice bona fides. While president of a national nonprofit that promotes school choice for black students, he's credited with growing Georgia's charter-school system and voucher programs in Milwaukee and New Orleans.

During his stint as Virginia's commissioner, Robinson fought to broaden the state's charter-school law. It's not unlike the law Scott signed last week that allows successful charter schools to proliferate around the state.

Beyond that, Robinson's affinity for homeschooling, virtual learning programs, and performance pay also aligns with Scott's school-choice vision.

As Robinson recently told the Palm Beach Post, he's touching down in the Sunshine State at an "interesting point in its educational evolution." Only his background would suggest that evolution might include the unacceptable extinction of traditional public schools.

It's encouraging, then, that despite all his efforts to promote school choice, Robinson seems to understand the necessity to "expand quality schools across the spectrum," as he told the Post.

As commissioner, he inherits a tidal wave of new reforms he'll have to implement. Tenure's on the way out and merit pay is on the way in. This fall, school districts will begin rolling out teacher evaluation systems that measure quality judged in part by standardized test scores. Teachers should be encouraged that he has indicated he's willing to listen to their vision on the shape those evaluations take.

And if that wasn't enough, Robinson steps in with the state in the throes of grafting on reforms borne of the \$700 million federal Race to the Top grant.

Robinson wisely told reporters that he's coming not with a jackhammer, but a microscope.

"There is nothing new under the sun," he said. "I am not arriving with new ideas but trying to identify what works and what doesn't work."

What won't work is a tunnel-vision focus on choice, something that critics said he showed in Virginia.

Loosening the one-size-fits-all educational handcuffs through high-quality academic options for students and families makes sense. But as commissioner overseeing 67 districts, Robinson can't lose sight that the 137,000 students enrolled in the state's charter schools is a mere fraction of the 2.6 million students in Florida public schools.

Robinson says he doesn't consider school choice the panacea for Florida's scholastic ills. That's an encouraging sign that he won't blindly chase hot trends to the detriment of Florida's school children.

It's something he'll need to remind Scott and the Legislature of as the push to siphon public money for private use gains traction.

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Florida “average” in new ranking of students’ readiness for science, engineering

Orlando Sentinel

By: Leslie Postal

July 2 2011

http://blogs.orlandosentinel.com/news_education_edblog/2011/07/florida-average-in-new-ranking-of-students-readiness-for-science-engineering.html

High school students need to take calculus and physics in high school, if they want to succeed in engineering and science courses in college and land careers in those oft-touted STEM fields. Yet most states are doing a poor job of preparing high school students for engineering and science after graduation, according to a new national ranking.

Massachusetts showed best in the new Science and Engineering Readiness Index, Mississippi looked the worst and Florida was among those ranked just average.

The index was put together by Susan White of the American Institute of Physics and Paul Cottle, a physics professor (and blogger) at Florida State.

In a release put out today with the index, Cottle said the index focuses on physics and calculus because they are most tightly tied with students’ STEM success — and STEM success is what the country needs to remain economically competitive.

From the release: “The SERI scores do not show how states’ educational outcomes compare with international standards, but even Massachusetts would have a hard time competing with countries such as China or Singapore.Cottle says he hopes that the SERI scores serve as a wake-up call for policy makers who don’t see physics as a necessary college prerequisite.”

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STATE NEWS

Opinion: Grades can drive state's school improvement:

Louisiana Times Picayune

By: Matthew Ladner

July 02, 2011

http://www.nola.com/opinions/index.ssf/2011/07/grades_can_drive_states_school.html

Louisiana is taking specific steps to improve the quality of education in its schools. Under the revised accountability system, schools will receive a score based on student performance and progress, which translates into a letter on the A-F grading scale. Louisiana isn't the first state to launch this highly effective reform plan, and, true to form, her first year of grades will be rough. But if this state, like others that have implemented this change, has the courage to see its way through the gales of controversy, students in Louisiana can create their own success story.

In 1998, Florida's students scored fifth from the bottom on the Nation's Report Card in fourth-grade reading while Louisiana had the second-to-lowest scores in the country. The following year, led by then newly elected Gov. Jeb Bush, Florida lawmakers passed a comprehensive set of K-12 reforms. The linchpin of the multifaceted strategy involved grading schools A, B, C, D or F -

- just like students. The letter grades policy generated enormous controversy, but Florida's reformers held the line. According to the most recent report, Florida moved to the 10th-ranked state and is the only state in the top 10 with a "majority minority" student demographic profile and a high percentage of low-income students. In contrast, Louisiana has fallen to the lowest scoring state in the nation.

Louisiana has far to go when compared against other states, but Florida's success shows that progress is possible. Florida's reformers required courage to see the school grading policy through. In the first year, 677 Florida schools earned D and F grades, while only 515 schools earned A or B grades. Critics of the policy claimed that schools with F grades would find themselves stigmatized in a spiral of decline.

Floridians, however, rose to the occasion. Rather than grouching about the unpleasant truth, they rolled up their sleeves. People rallied around their schools, and volunteers stepped up to help tutor lagging students. Change came quickly -- by the second year Florida had twice as many A/B graded schools as D /F. Since then, standards have been raised four different times to make it more difficult to earn an A or B grade, yet today Florida has 10 times more A or B schools than D or F schools.

The Nation's Report Card -- an external audit of state testing systems -- confirms Florida's progress. In 2009, Florida's low-income, Hispanic and black student averages exceeded several statewide averages for all students in reading. Florida's Hispanic students scored higher than or tied 31 different statewide averages for all students. Florida's black students outscored the statewide averages for all students in eight states, including Louisiana, and moved to within striking distance of many more.

The difference between an A and an F grade is easy to understand, but most states use labels that don't clearly convey this information. For instance, in my home state of Arizona schools labeled "performing" would fall into the C, D or F category in Florida. In Phoenix, one can see enormous banners from schools proclaiming "We are a Performing School!" when, in fact, only 6 percent of schools statewide receive a label lower than performing.

Arizona policymakers therefore joined not only Florida and Louisiana, but also Indiana, New Mexico and Utah in adopting clear school grades. Policymakers in Minnesota, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin have been considering school grades proposals this year as well.

Complete honesty and transparency concerning schools will not be easy, but it can move the academic needle. If there were a simple and effective way to improve academic achievement, Louisiana would have done it decades ago.

Sometimes the hard way is the only way. Louisiana's low K-12 ranking represents a problem to vigorously solve rather than a condition to accept. Shooting straight with Louisiana's parents and citizens represents a vital first step toward delivering the schools that its students need and deserve.

Dr. Matthew Ladner is the senior advisor for policy and research at the Foundation for Excellence in Education in Tallahassee, Fla., and author of numerous studies on school choice, charter schools and special education reform.

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Teachers sue Indiana on new vouchers law

Indianapolis Star

By: Scott Elliott

July 1, 2011

[HTTP://WWW.INDYSTAR.COM/ARTICLE/20110701/LOCAL/107010372/TEACHERS-UNION-SUES-INDIANA-SCHOOL-VOUCHERS](http://WWW.INDYSTAR.COM/ARTICLE/20110701/LOCAL/107010372/TEACHERS-UNION-SUES-INDIANA-SCHOOL-VOUCHERS)

The Indiana State Teachers Association this morning filed suit against the state asking a Marion County court to block implementation of the new school vouchers law.

The suit argues that school vouchers, which redirect a portion of state aid from public school districts to private schools for some low and middle income parents, violate the state constitution. According to the suit, the state constitution forbids the use of tax dollars to support religious institutions and requires public education funds to be spent only on a "uniform system of common schools," that are open to all. The suit argues that private schools do not qualify as part of that system.

The union asked for a preliminary injunction to prevent the program from launching this fall. The law that created vouchers goes into effect today.

"There is no question that this law violates the provisions of the Indiana Constitution that protect taxpayer dollars from being funneled to private, religious and for-profit organizations," said Teresa Meredith, a Shelbyville teacher and ISTA vice president. "This voucher program will provide public funds to private schools that can give individual preference to students based on test scores, disabilities, wealth and personal faith. Such preferences should not be publicly funded."

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Federal grants go to 11 Northeast Ohio school districts for innovative programs

Cleveland Plain Dealer

By: Edith Starzyk

July 2, 2011

http://blog.cleveland.com/metro/2011/07/federal_grants_go_to_10_northe.html

Eleven Northeast Ohio school districts have won a share of \$16.2 million in federal funds that the state is doling out over the next three years for innovative programs.

The districts - Akron, Buckeye, Brooklyn, Cardinal, Cleveland, Cleveland Heights-University Heights, Fairport Harbor, Kenston, Maple Heights, Oberlin and South Euclid-Lyndhurst - are all participating in the state's Race to the Top program. They had to compete for the Innovative Grants, part of the \$400 million that Ohio was awarded almost a year ago as one of a dozen Race to the Top winners. The U.S. Department of Education staged the Race to raise test scores and graduation rates in the nation's public schools.

Oberlin got one of the biggest innovation grants -- \$718,048 to add to an International Baccalaureate program that began in 2007. Superintendent Geoffrey Andrews said he was especially excited by the news since Oberlin, with about 1,200 students, was asking for a lot per pupil.

"It couldn't have happened without the partnerships we have all the way around the district," he said, adding that both the teachers union and school board had to sign on to be part of Race to the Top. "I credit our folks with taking a leap of faith that we could work together."

Oberlin was the first Ohio district authorized to offer the rigorous IB program to students at all grade levels. The grant will be used to train teachers, bring IB coaches to each school for 20 days a year, and create online portfolios of high school students' work.

Another piece will be used to collaborate with Oberlin College and other groups to offer Mandarin Chinese. Andrews might be able to help with that, even though Thursday was his last official day as superintendent. He's leaving to become director of the Western Academy of Beijing.

Most of the 45 innovation grants awarded across the state will be used on five programs already operating in some Ohio schools.

Cleveland Heights-University Heights will get \$750,000 for New Tech, a high school program that uses technology in real-world projects.

Cleveland will get \$600,000 to bring the global approach of the Asia Society to Lincoln West High School and the new Campus International School.

Fairport Harbor will get \$561,750 to offer an Early College High School, allowing students to earn high school and college credit at the same time.

Akron, Brooklyn, Cardinal, Maple Heights and South Euclid-Lyndhurst each will get \$61,000 for the Advancement Via Individual Determination program - commonly known as AVID -- which emphasizes college-readiness.

Cleveland, Buckeye and Kenston each will get \$250,000 for STEM, which concentrates on science, technology, engineering and math. Cleveland already has a high school called MC2STEM; it will use the new grant in five elementary schools.

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Michigan Senate tightens teacher tenure

Detroit News
Karen Bouffard
July 1, 2011

<http://www.detnews.com/article/20110701/SCHOOLS/107010394/1026/schools/Michigan-Senate-tightens-teacher-tenure>

Measure ranks effectiveness over seniority in evaluations

Lansing— The Legislature ended its first 180 days in session late Thursday, altering teacher tenure rules and passing a bill that caps how much taxpayers can pay on health care for public workers and elected officials — including state lawmakers.

Teachers will be easier to fire and demote under the four-bill package passed by the Senate and swiftly approved by the House over strenuous objections from Democrats and teachers.

The reforms roll back decades of union-won protections for teachers, who milled in the halls outside the Senate chamber and thronged the gallery as the votes were cast late Thursday.

The measures represent major reforms pledged by the Republican-led House and Senate and Gov. Rick Snyder. The bills now head to the governor, who is expected to sign them into law.

"We have had tremendous accomplishments in first 180 days — accomplishments that would have taken years in previous sessions of the Legislature," said Ari Adler, spokesman for Republican House Speaker Jase Bolger of Marshall. "These were reforms that have been laid out since January.

"The House Republicans were given the majority because the voters wanted to see change, they wanted to see reforms in government spending and government operations."

Sen. Paul Scott, R-Grand Blanc, called the tenure package "true reform that helps the students and teachers of this state."

"Teachers will have to earn tenure through effective evaluations... and will still be protected from firing of an arbitrary and capricious nature," Scott said. "Due process will be preserved."

Supporters say the tenure legislation is aimed at making effectiveness rather than seniority the key factor in awarding tenure.

Democrats say the proposals are part of a continued legislative attack on teachers and union rights. The legislation would allow school districts to more easily fire poor-performing teachers and set requirements for earning tenure, eroding union protections

that critics say sometimes safeguard teachers' jobs at the expense of students.

The bills were among a flurry of legislation pushed through in marathon sessions before the Legislature's two-month break, which starts today. The Senate also passed a repeal of driver responsibility fees, and a 1 percent claims tax to support Medicaid funding, which now head to the House. The House also passed a series of bills late Thursday that would regulate for the first time farms and game preserves that raise exotic hogs, pigs and boars — often for hunting. Those bills now go to the Senate.

In December, Michigan's Department of Natural Resources set in place a ban on feral swine that is scheduled to go into effect July 8.

The tenure bills had passed earlier in the day in the Senate over strong objections from Democrats, including Sen. Coleman Young of Detroit, whose remarks brought hoots and applause from teachers who packed the Senate gallery and prompted Lt. Gov. Brian Calley to admonish them to be silent.

"Paris Hilton has a better chance of winning an Oscar than this bill does of reforming the education system," Young said.

Sen. John Gleason, D-Flushing, said the package "maligned" the teaching profession. Taylor Democrat Sen. Hoon-Yung Hopgood said the package "does not make sense for our educators and our children."

Republicans said critics are overhyping the effects of the proposals on union rights.

"This is not an attack on collective bargaining," said Sen. Phil Pavlov, a Republican from St. Clair. "The claims that collective bargaining is being gutted are greatly exaggerated."

Teachers wearing red T-shirts, advocates with the Education Trust Midwest and StudentsFirst, and representatives of the Michigan Education Association, the state's largest teachers union, were among the throng.

The Legislature also sent to Snyder a bill that would limit school districts and county and municipal employers' contributions to employee health care costs, starting in January. The bill also applies to elected officials whose insurance is paid by the public, including members of the Legislature.

"I have said from the beginning that this House should lead by example and I'm pleased with our action to rein in spending on public employee benefits," said Bolger. "The public should not be responsible for providing benefits that often are far greater than what they have available."

Republicans said the measure will help the state and municipalities save money on health care costs.

"This is significant reform that will help bring the benefits of public employees in line with those of the people who are paying for them," Adler said.

But Ray Holman, legislative liaison for UAW Local 6000, which represents state employees, called it the "latest example in a long line of attacks on public employees and the middle class."

Republicans were unable to muster support for a measure that would also have extended the cap to state employees.

The Civil Service Commission has sole authority over state employees, so the cap does not apply to them.

Republicans failed Thursday to pass a measure to amend the state Constitution to allow them to extend the cap to state employees. Both chambers would have had to approve a resolution by a two-thirds majority to hold a ballot election to allow voters to decide the issue.

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