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To:

CC:

Date: Thu, 4/21/2011 11:42:43 AM

Subject: Foundation for Florida's Future, Key Reads: 4/21/11

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NATIONAL NEWS

For AP Students, a New Classroom Is Online

Wall Street Journal

By: Sue Shellenbarger

April 20, 2011

http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703922504576272872529316328.html?mod=WSJ_hps_sections_careerjournal

When budget cuts wiped out honors French classes at her Uxbridge, Mass., high school, 18-year-old Katie Larrivee turned to the Internet.

These days, Ms. Larrivee, who plans to study abroad in college, practices her pronunciation alone in front of a computer.

"J'ai renforcé ma compréhension de la langue" by taking an advanced-placement French course online, Ms. Larrivee says.

Advanced-placement classes have been booming amid efforts by high-school students and parents to trim college tuition costs and gain an edge in the college-admissions race. A record 1.99 million high-school students are expected to take AP exams next month, up 159% from 2000, says Trevor Packer, vice president, advanced placement, for the College Board, New York, the nonprofit that oversees AP courses and testing. About 90% of U.S. colleges and universities award college credit to high-school students who pass the program's rigorous subject-matter tests.

The courses, however, can be expensive for schools to offer because they are often smaller than average, making it hard to justify keeping them amid teacher layoffs and cutbacks in sports and arts programs that serve more students. Some schools also pay the \$87 fee for a student to take an AP exam, and scholarships are often available for kids who can't afford the fees.

For students in districts facing budget cuts, online courses are becoming an increasingly popular option. Courses require students to log on, and teachers are available by email, phone, online discussions or instant messaging. After completing the course, students take the AP exam in school like other students.

Online courses permit students to click on a current lesson, read materials, complete exercises or quizzes, and file assignments or exams online. Online whiteboards enable teachers to sketch lecture notes or show solutions to problems. Students practice skills and problems through interactive quizzes or games, and complete group projects on collaborative websites.

While only about 0.5% of AP classes are currently taken online, virtual courses are becoming available through online schools in 27 states, state programs that allow students to sign up for individual online courses in 32 states, or charter schools. Students also can enroll directly in online AP classes for a fee through private companies that offer them directly; Advanced Academics, Oklahoma City, charges \$425 for a one-semester AP class. Apex Learning, Seattle; Aventa Learning and its parent company K12 Inc., Herndon, Va.; or the Florida Virtual School, Orlando, Fla., also offer online AP courses.

Kirby Kirkpatrick, a father from Plainfield, Ind., signed up his two daughters for online AP classes through a charter school because it offered both traditional classes and a wider variety of AP classes, both in class and online, than their small public high school. The charter school has students attend classes on campus for two days a week and take online courses three days a week. His daughter Kayla, 17, will be taking several AP exams next month and hopes to enter college with as many as 24 college credits, saving the family several thousand dollars in tuition. His daughter Kori, 15, also takes AP courses online.

"They get as much school work done in 3½ hours as it takes eight to do" in a traditional school day, Mr. Kirkpatrick says. Kayla Kirkpatrick says she likes moving through the material at her own pace, in contrast with a traditional classroom where "sometimes I'm really bored, and other times it is moving way too fast for me."

One potential drawback for socially connected teens: taking an advanced placement course online seems to require advanced placement time-management skills. Being online with access to Facebook or Twitter, can be "a bit of a distraction," Kayla Kirkpatrick says.

To stay on track, she logs the assignments she must finish by the end of each day and highlights those that are completed. "I tell myself that when I get through X number of things, I can allow myself 10 minutes on Facebook," she says.

Ms. Larrivee, the student who is taking AP French, says splicing her online studies into the late-night or early-morning hours enables her to squeeze in more activities, including cheerleading, a communications internship and volunteering at a special-needs camp.

When taking her online course, Ms. Larrivee sometimes gets frustrated by the lack of a teacher and classmates nearby. She is graded on recordings of her French pronunciation exercises, but "I don't have someone I can physically have a conversation with about whether I'm pronouncing words well or using grammar the way I should," she says.

While some teachers reply quickly to emails and instant messages, others take a day or longer to respond.

The requirement for students to do lab experiments in science, particularly in chemistry, is another obstacle to online AP study. While physics and biology lab exercises and reports can sometimes be done at home using lab kits and supplies purchased for about \$175 to \$250, most online chemistry students have to travel to a supervised lab to do experiments involving volatile chemicals.

The College Board says there isn't any significant difference in average test scores between students from traditional versus online classrooms. No rigorous, peer-reviewed studies have been done using control groups to compare large samples of online AP students with those in traditional classroom. Smaller studies suggest students taking online classes achieve at about the same or higher levels than those in the classroom.

Officials are predicting cutbacks in AP classes in Michigan, where funding next year may fall 10%. Some school districts in upstate New York are considering eliminating almost all AP courses. Budget problems in some Ohio and Maryland schools have sparked talk of AP cutbacks.

In Pflugerville, Texas, a suburb of Austin, schools will continue to offer AP classes despite an expected 15% cut in state school funding, because they are so popular, a spokeswoman says. Alexandra Cubaleski, 18, a Pflugerville high-school senior who has taken 10 AP classes, says that in addition to earning college credit, "being in an AP class puts you a level above everybody else." She plans to attend New York University in the fall.

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Poll: In down economy, education key to youth jobs

Associated Press

By: Staff

April 21, 2011

http://abclocal.go.com/wtvd/story?section=news/national_world&id=8085985

Christopher Cadaret's been fixing TVs and stereos for fun since he was 10 years old and thinks he'd like to work in electronics or auto repair. But four months after he dropped out of high school, he can't find a job of any kind.

He's tried a local electronics company, the hardware store, the dollar store, the minimart. Nothing.

"I'm seeking work, anything that is put in front of me," said Cadaret, 18, who lives with his father in Burkesville, Ky., a small town amid the hills and farmland along the Tennessee border. He started looking for a job at 16. Without that first toehold on work, his dream of earning enough to save up for technical training seems far away.

The nation's economic upheaval has been especially hard on young people trying to start their working lives with a high school education or less. In a new Associated Press-Viacom survey, only about a third of the 18- to 24-year-olds who aren't in school said they have full-time jobs.

Less than a quarter of them work part-time, leaving 4 in 10 unemployed.

Young adults who skipped higher education are willing to work and have some experience; the vast majority have held a paying job at some point. About two-thirds have a high school diploma. But a majority -- almost 6 in 10 -- say the high school they attended did only a fair to poor job in helping them prepare for work.

About three-fourths worry at least a little about just having enough money to get by from week to week. Almost 4 in 10 still lean on their parents or relatives for financial support. And most feel that their family's financial situation has held them back, especially those whose families earn less than \$50,000 per year, according to the survey conducted in partnership with Stanford University.

Three-fourths of those who bypassed college cite cost as a reason. More than half -- 56 percent -- say money was "very" or "extremely" important to their decision.

They still believe in the power of higher education. Nearly three-fourths say they aspire to return to the classroom someday, either for trade school or college.

"I just feel like I've got enough drive and I'm not going to quit," said high school senior Jonathan McDaniel, who's made plans to join the Navy when he graduates from high school in Pittsburg, Okla., this spring. "If you work hard enough, you will get where you want to be."

McDaniel, 18, is interested in pursuing a college degree and maybe a career as a police officer or airplane mechanic. He figures starting out serving on an aircraft carrier "will give me a solid foundation to build my life on."

Almost half say getting real-world experience before going through more school was a key factor in their decision not to start college. And almost as many said they were influenced by their ability to find a job right after high school.

"I kind of always knew college wasn't for me," said Ayla Godfrey, 19, of Charlotte, N.C. "I was ready to get out and work, and I really didn't want to go back to school anymore."

Godfrey said it took her months and more than 100 applications to find work in a clothing store after she graduated from high school in 2009. She later worked as a hostess at an assisted living facility but quit that job after becoming pregnant. Godfrey, who lives with her boyfriend's family and relies on his paycheck, says she feels confident she'll find job happiness after her baby is born.

"I have to make a life for my little baby girl and I'm willing to do whatever I have to do," she said.

Young people whose education stopped at high school don't report as much certainty about the future as those in college, but they're still strikingly optimistic -- 8 in 10 are at least somewhat confident they'll find a career that will make them happy.

Most of those with jobs don't feel they've found their calling, however. Six in 10 say their job is just something to get them by, not a career or a stepping stone to one.

And the dismal job market leaves many feeling shut out. The Labor Department's overall unemployment rate for the youngest workers -- 16- to 19-year-olds -- is 24.5 percent, and that counts only those considered to be actively looking for jobs.

"It's going to take time for the economy to work itself back up for people to find jobs," said Cadaret, who keeps looking. Meanwhile, he said, "I'm worried about money all the time."

The AP-Viacom telephone survey of 1,104 adults ages 18-24 was conducted Feb. 18-March 6 by GfK Roper Public Affairs & Corporate Communications. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3.5 percentage points.

Stanford University's participation in this project was made possible by a grant from The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

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Q&A with Sandy Kress, key architect of No Child Left Behind

Hechinger Report

By: Sarah Butrymowicz

April 20, 2011

http://hechingerreport.org/content/qa-with-sandy-kress-key-architect-of-no-child-left-behind_5642/

It's that time of the year again when Congress considers reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known since 2001 as the [No Child Left Behind](#) ^[3] (NCLB) Act. Reauthorization has been stalled for years.

NCLB has been widely praised for its requirement that states and schools break down their test results by subgroups—across racial, socioeconomic and other lines—to highlight achievement gaps. But it's also garnered lots of criticism for its focus on standardized test-scores and its system of rating schools according to whether they make “adequate yearly progress.”

[Sandy Kress](#) —who, as senior advisor to President George W. Bush, was one of the key architects of NCLB—recently [wrote](#) ^[5] in a New York *Daily News* op-ed that the Obama administration's proposed changes to the law would gut it of the accountability

measures Kress believes are crucial to its success.

“No Child Left Behind does indeed need to be fixed and updated,” he wrote. “But it would be a classic case of throwing the baby out with the bath water to abandon its pillars of accountability. Yet this is precisely what the administration is proposing to do.”

The Hechinger Report talked with Kress earlier this month to get his take on the upcoming attempt at NCLB reauthorization.

***The Hechinger Report:* If you were solely responsible for reauthorizing No Child Left Behind, what would you do?**

Kress: I would update it. I would go deeper. Things that interest me—I would have more of an emphasis on the goal of postsecondary readiness. I would encourage states to develop their standards, both content and, now, performance standards. I would put more of an emphasis on secondary education—put the S back in ESEA. I think the [Obama] administration has some splendid ideas on teacher effectiveness. I would redo Title II. I would try to target Title I better ... I would definitely try to resolve this issue of transition from the current performance standards to these higher standards, which deals with the 2014 issue [when all U.S. schools must reach 100% proficiency among students or be labeled failing]. So, I would try to do a lot of those things.

***The Hechinger Report:* You’ve said ESEA has low odds of successfully being reauthorized in the near future. Why is that?**

Kress: These are very, very tricky issues to do them in a high-quality way. Could they pass a bill saying ... ‘Hey, time-out on all of this?’ Yeah, that’s easy to do. It’s not very noble, not very worthy. I don’t think [it would be] very satisfying. That would be the least memorable, sorriest reauthorization you’ve ever had. So I’m hoping that’s not where we’re going. But to do it seriously, to deal with the kind of issues I just talked about, even substantively—forget the political issues—very difficult challenges to do right, smart. And I think we know from No Child Left Behind, which I thought was a pretty good piece of work, huge problems come out with whatever you do. Those are tough issues. I don’t see how you get them resolved this late in the season. And then the politics is bizarre. I just don’t see it happening.

***The Hechinger Report:* If it doesn’t get reauthorized soon, what do you see the future of federal education legislation being?**

Kress: It’s going to take leadership. ... Leaders on the Hill and people in the nonprofit world need to come together around principles and see what they can do administratively and then lead up to legislation. You’ve got to remember, No Child Left Behind was the result of a lot of work in the states around accountability. We worked on it hard. The Congress had worked on it for two years before we got there. And then, we had an incredibly hard year. But we tried to bring together all that work. That’s what has to happen today. I just think it’s a lot of work and a lot of thought and there needs to be a good spirit. I mean, back then we had Senator [Ted] Kennedy and Representative [George] Miller, and Judd Gregg and John Boehner and George Bush sitting together, working together. We need to have that kind of approach.

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FLORIDA NEWS

Lawmakers should reject proposals to divert public funding to religious schools

Orlando Sentinel

By: Staff

April 21, 2011

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/opinion/os-ed-blaine-amendment-repeal-042111-20110420.0.7224781.story>

When it comes to government funding, Florida's public schools are in a world of hurt.

The federal stimulus dollars that softened the blow to schools from plunging tax collections and state funding since 2009 are running out. Rival spending plans for next year from the state Senate and House each would cut at least \$1 billion in state aid to schools. A cut that deep would slash per-student funding to its lowest level since 2005.

This financial squeeze on public education should be enough to persuade state lawmakers to reject proposals from two of their colleagues from Central Florida — proposals that could clear the way to divert some of the diminishing flow of education dollars from public to private, religious schools.

The proposed constitutional amendments, sponsored by Sen. Thad Altman of Viera and Rep. Scott Plakon of Longwood, would repeal a provision in the Florida Constitution that bars using state or local government funding "directly or indirectly in aid of any church, sect, or religious denomination or in aid of any sectarian institution."

Supporters of the repeal argue that the provision, known as the Blaine Amendment, is a shameful vestige of anti-Catholic discrimination from long ago. Florida was among three dozen states that adopted similar constitutional bans on public funding for religious organizations in the late 19th century amid a wave of Catholic immigration. Many amendment supporters at the time feared the government would begin bankrolling private schools for Catholics.

The amendment's language, however, applies to all religions; it doesn't single out Catholics. The argument for repeal is further weakened by the fact that a commission that revised the Florida Constitution in 1968 chose to readopt the amendment, and the 1998 revision commission left it intact. Clearly, those expert panels didn't consider the provision to be a historical wrong that cried out for correction.

A Florida circuit judge cited the amendment in 2002 in striking down as unconstitutional a statewide school voucher program from then-Gov. Jeb Bush. The program allowed students from failing public schools to use state-funded "opportunity scholarships" to pay tuition at private schools, including religious ones.

Two appeals panels affirmed that opinion for the same reason in 2004, though the state Supreme Court ultimately ruled against the program in 2006 on other grounds. Even so, getting rid of the amendment now would remove an obstacle for those in Tallahassee who would reroute government funding from public to private schools, including religious ones.

Just last week, a bill to give public-school dollars directly to families to spend on private schools or home instruction was endorsed by the Senate's education committee. The bill would fulfill one of Gov. Rick Scott's campaign promises, but it couldn't come at a worse time for Florida's cash-starved public schools.

We recognize a strict application of the Blaine Amendment could be grounds for a court to cut off government funding for a range of worthy faith-based programs, including ones that provide services to prisoners and the poor. Instead of repealing the amendment outright, lawmakers should consider narrowing it to bar public funding for religious schools without ruling out support for other faith-based programs that meet important public needs without pushing religious views.

Another part of the Florida Constitution guarantees "a uniform, efficient, safe, secure, and high quality system of free public schools." Lawmakers need to start doing a better job of upholding that responsibility, instead of plotting ways to get around it.

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Flagler to hire teacher to meet virtual course enrollment increases

Daytona Beach News-Journal

By: Annie Martin

April 21, 2011

<http://www.news-journalonline.com/news/local/flagler/2011/04/21/flagler-to-hire-teacher-to-meet-virtual-course-enrollment-increases.html>

BUNNELL -- Enrollment in Flagler County's virtual courses has doubled since last year and Flagler County school administrators expect that trend to continue.

About 250 students enrolled in at least one iFlagler course this school year, said Diane Dyer, the district's director of high school and virtual education. Students enrolled in about 480 half-credit courses, she said.

To accommodate those students, whose numbers are expected to increase again next year, the School Board voted Tuesday night to hire a full-time teacher to instruct students in core subject areas and provide career and academic counseling. The estimated cost to the district is \$50,000, which includes the teacher's benefits.

The program now has 15 adjunct instructors who teach one to four virtual classes.

"My gut says we need to be ahead of the curve on this one," Vice Chairman Andy Dance said before the vote.

Dyer attributed the growth in enrollment to class-size limits, word-of-mouth and more awareness of the program. Many iFlagler students attend one of the traditional high schools, which offer labs where students can do virtual coursework, she said.

English and social studies classes are the most popular iFlagler courses, though students can take courses in noncore subjects like physical education. The district will add a 12th-grade math course next year, Dyer said.

The number of students taking online courses statewide could increase as well. A proposed state House bill would require students to take at least one virtual course before high school graduation and require districts to offer full- and part-time virtual school options.

Another proposal would allow home-schooled children to take virtual classes, and provide funding for virtual charter schools.

The district started iFlagler, a franchise of the public Florida Virtual School, in 2009. iFlagler uses the same curriculum as Florida Virtual School, but there are differences between the two systems.

Students enrolled in iFlagler courses work with local teachers and the school district receives funding based on the number of students enrolled in those courses. Students must enroll in iFlagler courses during the traditional school year, while Florida Virtual School classes are year-round.

iFlagler students must also score above the first level on the reading portion of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.

As an alternative to Florida Virtual School, iFlagler is at a crossroads, said Tom Tant, the district's chief financial officer.

"Either we make this step with iFlagler or students will move to Florida Virtual School and we'll lose (the funding)," Tant said.

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Schools issue a bureaucratic nightmare

Florida Times-Union

By: Ron Littlepage

April 20, 2011

<http://jacksonville.com/opinion/blog/400601/ron-littlepage/2011-04-20/schools-issue-bureaucratic-nightmare>

School Board Chairman W.C. Gentry didn't mince words when he kicked off the board's discussion on dealing with Tallahassee's requirements for Jacksonville's four intervene schools.

What the board has run into, Gentry said, "is by far the most absurd example of bureaucratic ineptitude that I have ever seen."

While the board has "struggled mightily" to find solutions that "are in the best interests of our children," Gentry said, it has been caught up in a "bureaucratic morass" and a "system designed for failure."

Tough words, but as the board sought agreement during a workshop Tuesday, it was abundantly clear that Gentry wasn't exaggerating.

Low test scores have tagged Andrew Jackson, Raines and Ribault high schools and North Shore K-8 with the intervene label.

Big Brother in Tallahassee has given the board three options, no wiggle room.

Turn the schools over to an education management organization (you know bureaucrats are involved when terms like EMOs are used), turn the schools into charter schools or close them.

And, by the way, do it now, never mind that when scores on the latest round of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test come in later, the board is confident that enough improvement will have been made to make the issue moot.

In other words, this turmoil will have been for naught.

How absurd is the bureaucracy? Look at what was explained during the workshop.

Each of these schools qualifies for federal grants of about \$700,000, money that is used to help bolster struggling students.

Each of the schools has a number. The grants are assigned to those numbers.

Turn them into charter schools or close them and then reopen them with different missions, which is one option being considered, and the schools get new numbers.

And, voila, they don't get the \$700,000 because the money was assigned to the old number, not to the students who are the ones who will still need extra help.

After hearing that, board member Fel Lee summed it up nicely: "That's just ridiculous."

What's even more ridiculous is Tallahassee telling the board it must check one of three boxes when the board already has plans in place at the schools that are showing promise.

There isn't agreement on the board about how to meet Tallahassee's demands. Gentry favors turning management of the schools over to the Duval Partners for Excellent Education, a new nonprofit.

"We check the EMO box; we are through," Gentry said. "We are finished."

Board members Betty Burney and Paula Wright, who represent the districts where the schools are located, oppose giving up the board's management of the schools.

"I will never agree to check the EMO box," Burney said.

She prefers closing the schools and then reopening them, which would carry its own set of bureaucratic requirements.

The board will meet this afternoon to try to decide. Thanks, Tallahassee.

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STATE NEWS

South Carolina Senate committee defeats private school choice

Associated Press

By: Seanna Adcox

April 20, 2011

http://thetandd.com/news/article_9046df1e-6ba6-11e0-9d95-001cc4c002e0.html

COLUMBIA - In a stunningly swift vote Wednesday, a Senate committee defeated the latest South Carolina proposal to help parents send their children to private school, but advocates say the bill is far from dead.

The bill failed 6-10 in the Senate Education Committee following brief remarks from its sponsor. Advocates and opponents - many of them teachers on spring break - filled the room, expecting lengthy debate, but there was none.

"Everybody knew what the bill contained and either opposed or supported it philosophically," said Senate Education Chairman John Courson, R-Columbia, one of four Republicans to vote against the measure.

While the bill's eventual price tag of \$133 million annually played into his decision, Courson said it really came down to his belief that public, private and home schools should remain separate in kindergarten-through-12th-grade education.

The bill's main sponsor had a different take on the quick vote.

"The defenders of the status quo had the vote rigged before the meeting began," said Sen. Larry Grooms, R-Bonneau, who couched his bill as promoting the American ideals of freedom and liberty by giving parents greater ability to pick the school that's best for their child.

Opponents have long argued the state shouldn't re-direct public money to subsidize private schools that don't have to accept all students or abide by state and federal accountability laws.

The plan would give tax credits to parents who can afford to pay tuition upfront and provide scholarships to poor students. Businesses and people who donate toward those scholarships would get the tax credit.

The amount of tax credit or scholarship would vary by district, tied to half of whatever the state spends on a public school student there. Next school year, the statewide average would be \$2,417. Parents of children already in private school could not get any tax break for several years, and then only a reduced amount.

Wednesday's meeting followed weeks of discussion in a Senate subcommittee, which took the rare move of advancing the bill to the committee without voting to support or oppose it.

The idea of using tax credits to help parents afford private tuition has died repeatedly in the Legislature since former Gov. Mark Sanford rolled out the first version in 2004. It has also divided Republicans, as out-of-state money poured into campaign coffers in mudslinging primaries.

Advocates argued this year's re-tooled version addressed some previous criticisms and would save the state money. But an estimate by state budget advisers didn't support that.

Their 61-page report did show the state would save \$2 million the first year. However, starting in the second year, revenue lost due to tax credits would increasingly exceed savings due to reduced payments to districts as public school populations declined. Revenue loss to the state would reach \$133 million in 2023-24 when all students would be eligible, with the cumulative loss over the next 13 years of more than \$800 million.

Grooms and other supporters discount the report as flawed, saying more students than estimated would transfer, resulting in higher savings.

But the director of a teachers' advocacy group applauded senators for recognizing the cost.

"We're just coming out of the recession," said Kathy Maness of the Palmetto State Teachers Association. "It would just be a strain that hurts not only public education but all state agencies."

While the bill will not be revived this year in the Senate Education Committee, the fight will continue next week, as an identical bill comes up for debate in the House Education Committee. Grooms or other supporters may also try to debate it on the Senate floor by attempting to attach it to another measure.

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Michigan lawmakers debate teacher strike penalties

Associated Press

By: Staff

April 20, 2011

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/chi-ap-mi-teacherstrikelaws.0.7784143.story>

LANSING, Mich. – Teachers would face tougher penalties for taking part in illegal strikes under legislation debated Wednesday by Michigan lawmakers.

Proposals pending in the House Education Committee call for suspending teachers' licenses for at least two years if they participate in an illegal strike. Licenses could be permanently revoked in some cases.

Republicans say it would provide a stronger deterrent in Michigan law that already makes teacher strikes illegal. Lawmakers say that participants in some strikes have gone virtually unpunished when handled at the local level, so they want a state law that mandates repercussions.

"You have to put teeth into something to allow the system to work," said Rep. Bill Rogers, a Republican from Brighton and one of the legislation's sponsors.

Democrats say the measures are too punitive and unfairly single out teachers as opposed to other public employees. Opponents of the legislation also say current law appears to be effective, since strikes are rare and the last teacher walkout came in 2008 at Wayne-Westland Community Schools.

The House hearing comes as the Michigan Education Association, the state's largest teachers union, seeks approval from its members to "initiate crisis activities" up to and including a strike. Republican lawmakers consider it a strike threat.

Union leaders are upset about proposals they say undermine collective bargaining rights and proposed funding cuts to Michigan schools.

Doug Pratt, an MEA spokesman, said the strike penalty legislation is part of a broader effort "designed to scare people into being quiet" and make union members accept proposals they oppose.

"This is yet another example of lawmakers trying to silence the voices of school employees in this state, who oppose massive education cuts and other attacks on schools and kids that these lawmakers are pushing," Pratt said.

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U.S. education secretary says Newark schools reform could become a national model

New Jersey Star-Ledger

By: Staff

April 20, 2011

http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2011/04/us_education_secretary_visits.html

NEWARK — Newark occupies center stage in the national education reform movement, and U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan said if it can turn around its schools, New Jersey's largest city will set a national standard.

"Newark has this amazing opportunity to break through," Duncan said today. "The magnitude of that opportunity is staggering. If it can happen in Newark it can happen anywhere. The eyes of the country are here."

As a battle is waged over education reform in the city, Duncan stopped in Newark today to promote his and President Obama's plan to recruit one million new teachers over the next four years.

Better pay, improved teacher training, and stronger professional standards are key to improving public education in America, Duncan said. Without elevating the profession of teaching and raising standards for teachers and students, Duncan said the U.S. risks being eclipsed in the global marketplace.

There are over two million high-skill, high-wage jobs in the country that are not being filled because Americans are not graduating high school with the skills CEO's are seeking, Duncan said. There is a need for change, and "we as educators have to look ourselves in the mirror."

Flanked by Mayor Cory Booker, Congressman Donald Payne and Newark teacher Kariema Muhammad, Duncan encouraged the city to recruit and retain a pool of high-quality educators focused exclusively on student achievement. If that happens, he said, the district could be the best in the country in five years.

Duncan encouraged Newark to move quickly, saying New Orleans rallied around reform only after the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina. "Short of a hurricane, can Newark come together to get better faster than any other district?" he asked.

Muhammad, who teaches first grade at the 13th Avenue school in Newark, said she is ready for her profession to be taken more seriously.

"Teachers committed to what we're doing — we're not afraid of the change. We are ready. We are excited about it," Muhammad said.

The message came at a time when Gov. Chris Christie has declared war on the state's teachers' unions. Booker and Duncan did not criticize the governor but said vilifying teachers impedes progress in fixing education.

Booker said it's time to get out of the "narrow debate" that identified teachers as the enemy because "short-shrifting teachers will lead us to fail," he said.

Duncan also made stops in New Jersey at Drumthwacket, Gov. Chris Christie's official residence, and at Princeton University, where he addressed a packed house at Richardson Auditorium in Alexander Hall.

Christie credited Duncan and Obama with making possible the kinds of reforms happening now in New Jersey.

"Secretary Duncan and I have a lot of common views and interests on the school reform agenda," Christie said. "I agree wholeheartedly with the president's efforts in this regard."

At Princeton, Duncan called education the “civil rights issue of our generation,” and said the country should lead the world in graduation rates by 2020.

While community members welcomed Duncan’s encouragement, many in Newark remain skeptical about the task of turning around the city’s schools.

Problems such as poverty, lack of local control and lack of parental involvement are too complex to be solved overnight, said Robert Curvin, a prominent voice in city politics and education.

Curvin said he was heartened by Duncan’s outlook but said, “At the same time we want to inject a dose of realism into the discussion and make sure that we try to do this transformation in realistic bites so that we don’t set ourselves up for failure.”

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