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NATIONAL NEWS

Budget Deal Fuels Revival of School Vouchers

New York Times

By: Trip Gabriel

April 14, 2011

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/15/us/politics/15voucher.html?_r=3&ref=education

In the [11th-hour compromise](#) to avoid a government shutdown last week, one concession that [President Obama](#) made to Republicans drew scant attention: he agreed to finance vouchers for Washington students to attend private schools. The voucher program, whose main beneficiaries are church-affiliated schools, is close to the heart of the House speaker, [John A. Boehner](#), a product of parochial schools, who had repeatedly choked up defending it on the House floor last month.

The White House at first opposed the Opportunity Scholarship Program, saying it did not raise student achievement. But in the end it was an easy place to compromise, administration aides said, in order to save bigger, more prominent education initiatives favored by Democrats from the \$38 billion in cuts.

Mr. Boehner's beloved program is the latest example of how conservative Republicans across the country are advancing school vouchers — including offering them for the first time to middle-class families — and reviving a cause that until recently seemed moribund.

"Life has been breathed into the voucher movement," said [Grover J. Whitehurst](#), director of education policy at the [Brookings Institution](#). "I think they are part of what will be a more powerful and focused drive toward choice."

Voucher advocates have long argued that if a student can use public money to attend any school, even a private one, schools will compete and improve. Some black leaders see vouchers as a way for poor students to escape failing urban schools.

"When I walk into a Safeway and talk to a mother who had a child who was already part of the voucher program and had another one she wanted to sign up, how could I deny her the opportunity?" said [Kwame R. Brown](#), the Democratic chairman of the Council of the District of Columbia, who supports the city's voucher program.

But vouchers were never widely adopted. Voters in four states defeated voucher referendums through 2007, and state courts narrowed or ended some programs.

Much of the enthusiasm for school choice has been absorbed by [charter schools](#), which are secular and accountable under state standards like other public schools. Today, when 1.6 million students attend charter schools, the pro-voucher [Foundation for Educational Choice](#) says that only about 185,000 are in voucher or voucherlike programs.

The same gale-force winds battering teacher tenure and collective-bargaining rights, however, have led to a voucher revival.

“Where Republicans have taken over both the governor’s office and state legislatures, they’re pushing very hard on ideas that are grounded much more in ideology than on evidence they’ll have positive outcomes,” said [Greg Anrig](#), vice president for policy at the liberal Century Foundation.

Gov. [John Kasich](#) of Ohio wants to quadruple a state voucher program capped at 14,000 students in failing schools. In Indiana, a bill that is likely to pass the legislature soon would offer vouchers to families with incomes up to \$61,000. “I think it’s going to strengthen public schools through competition,” said Dennis Kruse, the Republican chairman of the State Senate education panel. “The schools will have to shape up if they want to keep the kids they have.”

Vi Simpson, the Democratic minority leader in the Senate in Indiana, said the vouchers would divert \$92 million from public schools when they are already facing steep declines in state and federal aid. “Either this hasn’t been very well thought out,” she said, “or it’s been very well thought out and it is intended to help public schools fail.”

Gov. [Scott Walker](#) of Wisconsin, who overcame a siege of the State Capitol to enact a law narrowing collective bargaining for public employees, mainly teachers, wants to expand Milwaukee’s voucher program, the nation’s oldest with 20,000 students. His plan would let any student, not just the poor, receive a voucher. Supporters say universal vouchers will make the city more attractive to the middle class.

But critics say that even after 21 years of vouchers, students receiving them perform no better than those in public schools on state tests of math and reading. Mr. Walker’s proposal “takes a program that’s supposed to be for low-income and working-class people and turns it into a subsidy for rich people,” said Howard L. Fuller, who was superintendent in the program’s early years.

“I will become an opponent of a program that I’ve fought 20 years of my life for,” he added. “I’ve been called every name under the sun for being a black person who would support, quote, the right-wing agenda.”

Dr. Fuller recalled debating an Illinois state senator opposed to vouchers in 1998, [Barack Obama](#).

Democrats in Congress in 2009 closed Washington’s voucher program to new students, and as recently as last month the White House opposed reopening it on the ground that it did not lift student achievement. That was the finding of the [United States Department of Education](#) last year. But the report showed that Washington voucher students had a 12 percent higher graduation rate.

Mr. Boehner introduced legislation last month to reopen the program, providing \$8,000 to \$12,000 per year for low-income students, a total of \$20 million annually for five years. After impassioned debate, the House bill passed March 29 on nearly a party-line vote. Its prospects in the Senate were considered poor.

Then came the budget negotiations between the White House and Congressional Republicans. For the administration, accepting Mr. Boehner’s voucher program was a small compromise compared with education priorities like maintaining financing for Head Start and [Race to the Top](#).

One person excited by that decision was Lydell Mann, a single father with two children in the voucher program. He chose the [Nannie Helen Burroughs School](#), owned by a Baptist denomination, for his children because the classes are smaller and the students more respectful, compared with what he observed when his daughter attended public school.

“Taking Ariona to school every day, noticing the language being used by the youth, noticing the trouble that would be started before and after school, I felt that environment wasn’t the greatest,” Mr. Mann said.

He was “ecstatic” that more families would have a chance to receive vouchers.

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The New Unionism, Legislative Version

Education Next

By: Eric A. Hanushek

April 15, 2011

<http://educationnext.org/the-new-unionism-legislative-version/>

An expanding list of states has joined in legislative battles over the future character of collective bargaining, a territory that was completely uncharted six months ago. A combination of state fiscal crises plus newly elected Republican legislatures and governors, has emboldened the legislatures in the traditionally union-friendly states of Wisconsin, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio. They are joined by states as diverse as Idaho, Alabama, Tennessee, and Oklahoma. But, what is it all about? Or, more interestingly, what should it be about?

The headline story has been fiscal issues – salaries, retirement and health benefits, and the bargains agreed to by legislatures past. But these issues have morphed into issues more fundamentally threatening to the unions – the right to strike, the ability to bargain about nonsalary issues, and the like. In response, the teachers unions have mounted a concerted counter-attack

aimed at restoring their prior position.

The fiscal issues are important, but I do not think they are the most important ones. In a recent article in *Education Next*, "[Valuing Teachers](#)," I presented evidence about the huge economic impacts of highly effective teachers. A parallel calculation also reveals the huge costs to highly ineffective teachers. To me, this is what we should be talking about. The quality of our teaching force determines the level of student achievement, and [student achievement directly determines](#) how our economy will develop in the long run.

I argue [elsewhere](#) that the teacher unions would be better off getting in front of the teacher quality issue. The low public regard for teacher unions is, I would argue, a result of public perceptions that concern for student outcomes ranks very low relative to the income, convenience, and preferences of the teachers themselves. The public – generally very supportive of teachers – does not understand union positions that over-protect the small number of teachers who are harming kids. The unions can try to rebuild their image (while doing good for America) by actively participating in efforts to figure out how to evaluate teachers and how schools can make personnel decisions based on those evaluations.

But, it should also be recognized that others in the schools are not innocent. First, the current fiscal problems of school systems, with excessive retirement and health packages, were the result of prior agreements by legislatures, administrators, and school boards. They were not unilaterally imposed by the unions.

Second, even in states without collective bargaining, there are precious few decisions made on the basis of teacher effectiveness. There is scant evidence that performance in states without collective bargaining is better than in states with strong collective bargaining.

Returning to the opening question: what should the current discussions be about? They should, in my mind, focus on how the incentives, rules, and actions can be arranged to ensure that there is indeed an effective teacher in every classroom. This in turn really means focusing on student learning.

The unions have to quit defending the worst of the worst. The majority of very good teachers need to quit tolerating the few bad teachers in their midst. The administrators have to quit hiding behind the "it's all the unions' fault" slogan and figure out how to evaluate teachers and to use that information in pay and retention decisions. The districts must hold administrators responsible for their decisions and set incentives for them that parallel those for teachers. The legislatures must reward districts for getting it right, not for getting it wrong.

The switch to a focus on student outcomes would be a dramatic change for all parties. And, returning to my underlying motivation, whether or not we can do this will have a lot to say about the future economic well-being of America. The contrasting futures of America with and without improvement of our schools are dramatically different.

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FLORIDA NEWS

Expanded school voucher plan advances in Florida Senate

Orlando Sentinel

By: Leslie Postal

April 14, 2011

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/features/education/os-vouchers-school-savings-accounts-20110414.0.631235.story>

Education savings account proposal gets favorable vote

A plan to expand school choice by creating education savings accounts — dubbed by some as "vouchers for all" — won a favorable vote from the Florida Senate's education committee this morning.

The education savings account would be a pot of public-school money that parents could use to pay for private school, homeschooling services or pre-paid college plans. It would be available to current public school students who left the system and to some who were not enrolled in public schools.

"It recognizes that parents should have choices," said Sen. Joe Negrón, R-Stuart, sponsor of the savings-account measure, which he called a "GI bill for kids."

Gov. Rick Scott and his advisers touted the controversial education savings-account idea earlier this year as an ultimate school-choice plan. But Scott later said he would not ask the Florida Legislature to approve it this session.

Negrón filed his bill, he said, so parents could choose the best educational options for their kids. He said he is a "strong supporter of public education" who sends his three children to public schools in Martin County.

"I get to make decisions with my wife for our children. But I don't get to make decisions for the state of Florida's children," he said.

The bill, SB 1550, would let parents use state taxpayer money to pay for their children to attend private schools, including

religious ones. The savings account money could also pay for homeschooling or tutoring services or college-savings plans. An identical House measure has not come up for a vote yet.

If the savings accounts were in effect this year, they would be worth about \$3,100 each, the Senate estimated.

The concept for the new, and expansive, choice plan was devised by the Goldwater Institute in Arizona as a way to offer parents options outside public schools but meet the constitutional problems of earlier school-voucher programs.

Florida's first private-school voucher program was struck down by the state supreme court in 2006. The court said the program violated state requirements for a "uniform" public school system and diverted "public dollars into separate private systems."

Senate staff in their analysis of the bill wrote that the new plan could face court challenges. The Florida Education Association, the statewide teachers union, has said it likely would sue, if such a plan passed because it violates the earlier court ruling. The union led the successful court battle against the now defunct voucher program.

Sen. Lizbeth Benacquisto, R-Wellington, questioned how the state could be sure parents who used the savings account spent the money on legitimate educational services.

What would stop a family from deciding, "I'm going to keep my child home and just keep the money?" she asked. "How will we be accountable there?"

Negron said parents would never have direct access to the money but would be allowed to divert it only to approved providers.

The amount deposited into the savings account would be equal to 40 percent of what the state spends to educate each student.

For each student who left the public school system, some of the remaining per-student state money would be made available to students not currently in public school. Those private or homeschooled students could then enter a lottery to be eligible for an education savings accounts, too.

According to the staff analysis, the bill could save the state's school finance program money but also would create additional work and expenses for the agencies overseeing it.

The bill passed unanimously, but Sen. Bill Montford, D-Tallahassee, the lone Democrat on the panel, said he wasn't convinced the concept was ready to become law.

"I'm going to vote for this bill," he said, "but I want to tell you up front I have some serious questions and I look forward to some intense discussions."

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It's been an important week for struggling schools

Gainesville Sun

By: Jackie Alexander

April 14, 2011

<http://www.gainesville.com/article/20110414/ARTICLES/110419684/1002/news01?p=all&tc=pgall>

Both Duval and Rawlings utilize a federal School Improvement Grant.

For Beth LeClear, principal of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Elementary School, the week of FCAT testing stays busy. At the end of the school day on Thursday, she was preparing to send test packets to the county for scoring.

Those scores will determine if the school is meeting federal progress standards after the school posted a failing state school grade in 2008.

"I'm not afraid of accountability," she said, but her school has work to do in order to improve its score.

School grades, which were enacted in 1999 by then-Gov. Jeb Bush, are based on the percentage of students meeting standards on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test as well as learning gains made by the lowest quartile of students.

Bush cites school grading as the start of a renaissance in state schools and increasing transparency.

Both Duval Elementary and Rawlings Elementary received a grade of F during the 2008-09 school year. Principals at both schools were replaced and the school day extended for more instruction. LeClear joined the Rawlings staff in 2009.

"When I got here, what I found were really nice children and parents who care," she said.

During the 2008-09 school year, both Eastside High and Gainesville High received a D. Shell Elementary as well as Rawlings and Duval each earned a D in 2010.

Last school year, less than 20 percent of students at Rawlings met high standards in science, and less than 40 percent of students made gains in math. At Duval, 22 percent of students met science standards, and 41 percent met reading standards. Both Rawlings and Duval had minority and free/reduced lunch rates over 90 percent, according to state Board of Education statistics.

Both schools utilize a federal School Improvement Grant in an effort to turn the schools around. The grant covers additional pay for teachers for extended school days, coaches in core courses and professional development for teachers.

Karla Hutchinson, a specialist at Rawlings, said the school analyzes weekly reading and math assessments to determine what kind of teaching decisions should be made.

"We do a lot of progress monitoring so there's no big surprises at FCAT time," LeClear said.

But that doesn't mean the school teaches solely to the test.

"We don't focus on the FCAT," she said. "We focus on good, old-fashioned teaching."

The failing grade at Rawlings in 2008-09 still depressed some teachers, said first-grade teacher Elizabeth Johnson.

"I think the kids work hard every single day from the time they come in until they leave," she said. "They want to learn, they want to do well, and they do learn."

There are still challenges to be had, LeClear said. Some students still read years below their grade level.

"You're not going to get them reading on the fifth-grade level in a year," she said. "I think that we probably have a long way to go."

Rawlings struggles partly because of its small size, LeClear said. It has fewer than 50 fifth-graders.

"One or two fifth-graders can make or break us," she said.

LeClear said she welcomes any chance to prove her teachers are doing well.

"We really need to have a good measure that is reliable and valid," she said. "Let's make sure it's an honest and true account."

Rawlings teachers spend many hours after school and on weekends planning lessons to prepare students, LeClear said.

"We come to work every day, and we do what's best for our kids," she said.

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STATE NEWS

Graduating to fourth grade likely to get harder in Oklahoma

Reuters

By: Steve Olafson

April 14, 2011

<http://www.fox4kc.com/news/nationworld/sns-rt-usreport-us-readingtre73d8tf-20110414.0.7476837.story>

Oklahoma City (Reuters) - The Oklahoma House on Thursday approved a measure that would end the long-held practice of promoting third-graders who can't read to the fourth grade.

The change, approved Thursday by a 59-34 vote in the House, has already been approved by the state Senate. The measure now heads to Governor Mary Fallin, who supports it.

Ending the so-called social promotion of students to the fourth grade is based on the belief that retaining struggling students will benefit them in the long run and that third-graders are at a critical junction.

"That's when students transition from learning to read to reading to learn," said Jaryn Emhof, a spokeswoman for the Florida-based Foundation for Excellence in Education.

Florida enacted a similar reform under former Governor Jeb Bush, who now heads the foundation. He visited Oklahoma City recently to encourage support for education reforms Republicans are seeking.

The Oklahoma bill faced opposition from Democrats, who said they were concerned holding third-graders back for reading deficiencies will stigmatize them and harm their self-esteem.

Under the bill, third-graders would have to show on an annual state assessment that they can read at grade level. The students already take the exam, but the legislation would make it a higher-stakes test.

Third-graders who fail to read at grade level could still be promoted to the fourth grade if they have a disability or limited English proficiency, the bill says. They may also be promoted if they perform at a certain level on alternative assessments or if they have received intensive remediation in reading and were previously retained for two years.

Deficient readers would be identified as early as kindergarten so they could receive special attention before third grade.

Indiana and Arizona enacted a similar measure last year, and legislators in Minnesota, Kansas, Missouri, Nevada, New Mexico and Oregon are considering doing so this year, Emhof said.

Oklahoma Republicans say the change is necessary because third-graders who can't read are four times more likely not to graduate on time and more likely to end up in prison.

"Our children need it," said Representative Sally Kern, a Republican from Oklahoma City who carried the bill in the House. "The best time to teach them to read is from kindergarten through third grade."

(Editing by Corrie MacLaggan and Jerry Norton)

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Major Changes to Teacher Tenure, Hiring and Firing Coming in Illinois?

Education Week

By: Sean Cavanagh

April 14, 2011

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/state_edwatch/2011/04/major_changes_in_teacher_rights_coming_in_illinois.html

Numerous Illinois lawmakers say they have struck a deal with unions and education advocates on a proposal that would make sweeping changes to the job protections and rights of teachers across the state.

The contours of the agreement are still emerging, and the legislation could very well change, going forward.

But supporters of the [proposal](#) are touting it as the antithesis of recently enacted laws on collective bargaining in [Wisconsin and Ohio](#), which have roiled the political waters and provoked union outrage in those states.

According to a [summary](#) provided by one of the measure's authors, the Illinois proposal would make major changes to teachers' seniority and tenure protections—while also carving out separate rules in some areas for the 409,000-student Chicago school district.

The current version of the proposal would:

- Require districts to consider performance and job qualifications, rather than just seniority in teacher layoff and recall decisions. (This section would not affect Chicago, where litigation is ongoing on this subject, lawmakers say.)
- Establish a streamlined process for districts to dismiss tenured teachers, in Chicago and other districts around the state.
- Allow Chicago public schools to increase the length of the school day and school year. The district would be required to bargain over the impact of those changes on teachers, such as whether they should be paid more for that work. But the school system would be authorized to make those changes while bargaining is ongoing.
- Make teachers' certifications, qualifications, ability, and "relevant experience" the determining factors for districts filling new and vacant positions. Seniority would only be tie-breaking factor in those decisions.
- Set new requirements on teachers receiving positive performance evaluations before they're granted tenure. Accelerated tenure could be given to teachers with sterling performance evaluations.

Union officials, and their critics, are sure to debate the relative toughness of those provisions—and how they stack up with other states' proposals. Once you've looked over the Illinois measure, give me your take.

Backers of the Illinois proposal are hoping that Illinois' full Senate approves it as soon as this week. But how quickly it would move after that point remains unclear.

A spokesman for Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan, a Democrat from Chicago, pointedly told me that "Illinois has two chambers in its legislature," and said House lawmakers would need time to consider the broad proposal.

"We're going to take a good, hard look at it over the next few weeks," said Steve Brown, a spokesman for Madigan.

Sen. Kimberly Lightford, a Democrat who worked on the agreement, described it as a melding of the views of groups—unions, legislators, groups that have called for changes in teacher job protections and that haven't cooperated in the past. Illinois' unions are saying [much the same thing](#).

"This is the result of all sides—reformers, unions and administrators—coming together," Lightford said in a statement, "to find workable solutions to long-disputed issues."

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NC Senate wants new look at charter school revamp

Associated Press

By: Staff

April 14, 2011

<http://www.wral.com/news/state/nccapitol/story/9441787/>

RALEIGH, N.C. – Disagreement among Republicans about how far to go to get bipartisan support means North Carolina lawmakers are taking a new look at legislation that would expand charter schools.

The state Senate voted 47-0 on Thursday to reject House changes. Republican Sen. Richard Stevens of Wake County says House lawmakers made about 30 changes and those need dialogue.

House Republicans spent weeks discussing changes with Democrats, who ultimately decided they wouldn't agree with the rules expanding the number of charter schools.

The House voted mostly along party lines to allow 50 additional charter schools to open each year. Charter schools are public schools free of many of the rules governing traditional schools.

Eliminating the 100-school limit was a Republican campaign promise last year.

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