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STATE NEWS

Grading changes for Indiana schools come under fire

Associated Press

By: Staff

January 23, 2012

<http://www.wftv.com/ap/ap/kids-family/grading-changes-for-ind-schools-come-under-fire/nG6Wh/>

MERRILLVILLE, Ind. — Proposed changes to Indiana's A-to-F grading standards for public schools are coming under fire from some educators, who contend the rules' proposed high school grading formula favors higher performing suburban districts.

The State Board of Education approved a draft in November of the new standards designed to replace the state's accountability measure and the "adequate yearly progress" standard in the federal No Child Left Behind law. The panel held a public hearing Jan. 17 on the changes.

State Department of Education spokeswoman Stephanie Sample tells the Post-Tribune (<http://bit.ly/zMw4nd>) that the state board could vote on final adoption of the rules as early as Feb. 8.

The state department included the new standards in its waiver application to the U.S. Department of Education to become exempt from No Child Left Behind standards.

Sample said state education officials believe their measurement system is more accurate than the adequate yearly progress measurement that left many schools with "C" grades because of lower scores from subgroups such as special education and non-English speaking students.

But the proposal has its critics, including Merrillville Community School Corp. Superintendent Tony Lux, who testified against the measure during the Jan. 17 hearing.

"There were probably about 100 people there and everybody had criticisms of the formula from school teachers to parents to charter schools and the Indiana Chamber of Commerce," Lux said. "I don't think there was any education group that supported it."

The proposed formula calls for elementary and middle schools to get scores for the percentage of students who pass standardized math and English tests. They receive bonus points or can be penalized, based on test-score growth and other factors.

Lux said it becomes more confusing at the high school level. He calls the proposed rules extremely complicated "and very difficult to explain."

Lux said that the rules' proposed high school growth formula is unfair and tilted toward higher performing suburban districts.

Besides passing rates and graduation rates, high schools would be graded by college and career readiness — Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate results, the completion of college dual credits and technical certifications.

Indiana high schools only have standardized tests in English 10 and Algebra I.

"The high school factor favors high wealth districts," said Lux, who said points would be deducted for general diplomas. "For some kids, just getting a general diploma is an accomplishment. Now, they want to ratchet up the criteria."

Sample called the new formula "a blind measurement of student performance, regardless of socio-economic factors. State law already requires each high school to offer at least two AP courses."

John Ellis, executive director of the Indiana Association of Public School Superintendents, said a bill now pending in the General Assembly contains many of the provisions included in the proposed grading system changes.

He calls that legislation "misleading."

"Because they use a bell curve, you've automatically got 33 percent at the top and 33 percent at the bottom. The problem is seeing where the rest would be. You could have huge improvement, you could end up at the bottom of the bell curve," Ellis said.

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Oklahoma schools Superintendent Janet Barresi defends new accountability system

The Oklahoman

By: Megan Rolland

January 24, 2012

<http://newsok.com/oklahoma-schools-superintendent-janet-barresi-defends-new-accountability-system/article/3642905>

State schools [Superintendent Janet Barresi](#) reassured online followers Monday that [Oklahoma](#)'s waiver from the [No Child Left Behind Act](#) wouldn't be a step away from accountability.

During a live streaming video interview on Monday, Oklahoma state schools Superintendent Janet Barresi answered questions that had been posted on the Oklahoma Republican Party's Facebook page.

"We believe in accountability and strong accountability," Barresi said. "Under No Child Left Behind every district worked hard to make sure they hit just kind of a golden number, if you will, just hit that test score number. And actually what happened is that led teachers into doing drill work with their classes. Well, no more."

Oklahoma will learn later this month whether the state has been granted a number of exemptions from federal education law in exchange for new reforms developed by lawmakers and Barresi.

Barresi was a guest on the [Oklahoma Republican Party's Facebook](#) Town Hall on Monday and the interview was streamed live online. In the weeks leading up to the interview, Facebook followers posted questions for Barresi on the Republican Party's Facebook page.

Chairman of the Oklahoma Republican Party, [Matt Pinnell](#), selected a few of the questions to ask Barresi, noting that many of them had to do with the state's waiver application.

"How do we plan to make sure that children are not left behind?" Pinnell asked.

Closing achievement gaps

"We know now that we need to focus on growth of each individual child throughout the year," Barresi said. "The granting this waiver will help us all focus on each child in this state. It's also one, with the way we've written it, to allow us to focus on sub groups and making sure we close those gaps in achievement."

She said she's never going to water down reforms.

Pinnell read another Facebook post that asked Barresi how she was going to improve curriculum for gifted students. "I have had many parents of gifted students come to me," Barresi said.

She said that federal law now has schools focused on making sure the lowest performing students are able to pass state exams.

The waiver from that law, she said, would instead have schools focusing on improving the test scores of each individual student regardless if they are the highest performing gifted students or those who are behind their peers.

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Opinion: Monaghan: Jindal's plan unfairly blames teachers

Baton Rouge Advocate

By: Will Sentell

January 24, 2012

<http://theadvocate.com/home/1878410-125/monaghan-jindals-plan-unfairly-blames.html>

The president of a state teachers' union said Monday that Gov. Bobby Jindal's public school agenda is confusing, troublesome and unfairly blames teachers for classroom problems.

Steve Monaghan, president of the Louisiana Federation of Teachers, also said that Jindal's comments last week needlessly drive a wedge between the governor and some school leaders.

"He would have been a lot clearer if he had said less," Monaghan said of Jindal's public school plan, which he unveiled on Jan. 17 in a 30-minute speech.

Monaghan, whose group frequently clashes with Jindal over public school policies, made his comments to the Press Club of Baton Rouge.

Jindal last week called for sweeping changes in how teachers are paid and evaluated and for a major expansion of students who would qualify for state aid to attend private and parochial schools.

Monaghan said that while the governor initially called teachers the backbone of the state's public school system, Jindal later used an analogy to claim that they enjoy lifetime job protections "short of selling drugs in the workplace."

Monaghan called the comments "really ugly," political "red meat" and the kind of stance that complicates talks to work out differences.

Kyle Plotkin, who is director of communications for Jindal, noted Monday that nearly half of Louisiana's public schools got a "D" or "F" rating last year.

"We are currently wasting nearly \$1 billion on failing schools," Plotkin said. "We need to spend those dollars in a smarter way."

Monaghan also took issue with Jindal's criticism of job protection laws — they are called tenure — as a status enjoyed by educators for merely surviving three years in the classroom.

"We need to have a debate about the value of experience," he said. "Teachers are being increasingly scapegoated."

Jindal wants teachers stripped of their certification if they are rated as ineffective for three years, which he called part of a plan to ensure that all children have a quality teacher.

He also wants new teachers to be rated as "highly effective" for five years in a row before they earn tenure.

The governor's plans will be debated during the 2012 regular legislative session, which begins on March 12.

In another area, Monaghan disputed Jindal's call for a major expansion of the number of students who would be eligible for state aid to private or parochial schools.

Jindal and other backers of the plan call the aid scholarships, which they say are needed to help students escape failing schools.

Monaghan and other opponents call the assistance vouchers, and say they drain resources from public schools.

Under Jindal's plan, low-income students in schools that the state assigned letter grades of "C," "D" or "F" would be eligible for the aid.

Only about 1,500 low-income students in New Orleans qualify now.

The governor's plan would increase that to 380,000 students, or 54 percent of Louisiana's public school enrollment.

Monaghan said Jindal "appears to believe that private education is superior" to public schools.

He said that, under the plan, students would be allowed to leave public schools given letter grades annually to attend those that face no such reviews.

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Two Iowa school districts to offer online academies next fall

Des Moines Register

By: Mary Stegmeir

January 23, 2012

<http://www.desmoinesregister.com/article/20120124/NEWS02/301240093/1004/Two-iowa-school-districts-offer-online-academies-next-fall>

Any Iowa child can attend through open enrollment.

Two Iowa school districts will launch online-only academies next fall, a development that state education officials say highlights the need for expansion of virtual learning opportunities in the state.

The CAM school district based in Anita will offer Web-based classes for kindergarten through 12th-grade students. Clayton Ridge school district, which includes facilities in Garnavillo and Guttenberg, will provide kindergarten through sixth-grade online classes and has plans to include middle school and high school courses in subsequent years.

Any Iowa child can attend the academy through open enrollment. The development of the programs proves there is a pent-up demand in Iowa for online-only K-12 classes, said Phil Wise, policy adviser with the Iowa Department of Education.

Under the governor's education reform proposal, \$5.4 million would be allocated over three years to increase the number of virtual classes now offered by the state.

"This is an example of where the state needs to catch up with technology that is moving quickly on its own," Wise said Monday during a House subcommittee meeting examining the governor's \$25 million school improvement plan.

The proposal calls for the expansion of Iowa Learning Online, an existing state initiative that provides distance education to state high school students.

A legislative brief released this month by the governor's office calls for additional money to be spent on the program annually for each of the next three years.

Iowa Learning Online was launched in 2004 by the Department of Education. It offers roughly 40 online classes and serves about 700 students annually, program director Gwen Wallace Nagel said.

Every course is taught by a state-certified teacher. And each semester, students are turned away because of a lack of resources, she noted.

Rep. Greg Forristall, R-Macedonia, said he supports expanding online classes. Internet-based learning can be an especially valuable option for students in small districts, he said.

"(This proposal) addresses the diversity among Iowa school districts," he said. "We have small, rural districts and large, urban districts ... and both will be able to offer courses that are now impossible (to offer) because of the limitations of the personnel that you need in a rural school."

The provision would allow the state to better "level the playing field for all school districts in the state," Nagel said.

"Many of our districts are rural in nature. They have a very basic curriculum to offer," she said. "They often don't have the capacity to offer language courses (or) to offer the high-end, rigorous science courses like anatomy and physiology. We can provide that for them."

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Critics say Florida's 'parent trigger' bill favors charters over public schools

Miami Herald

By: Kathleen McGroarty

January 23, 2012

<http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/01/23/2604146/critics-say-parent-trigger-bill.html>

A proposal known as the parent trigger has some parents up in arms.

TALLAHASSEE – Florida parents are taking sides over a controversial piece of legislation known as the parent trigger.

The buzzed-about bill would let a majority of parents at low-performing public schools demand dramatic changes at the school, or even have it converted into a publicly financed, privately managed charter school. Similar laws have already passed in California and Texas, sparking debate and controversy along the way.

The Florida version comes in front of House and Senate panels Tuesday.

Supporters of the bill say it gives power to dissatisfied parents.

"The more we can do to empower parents and give them tools to enhance their children's education, the better outcomes we're going to get," said Rep. Michael Bileca, R-Miami, who is sponsoring the proposal in the House.

But a coalition of parent groups that includes the Florida PTA says the bill is really aimed at promoting charter schools and for-profit school management companies.

"This isn't about empowering parents," said Mindy Gould, legislative chair for the Florida PTA. "This is about handing over the neighborhood school to a private, for-profit corporation."

Under state and federal law, school districts must enact dramatic changes at their lowest-performing schools. School board members have a menu of options: they can replace the principal and pump resources into the school, hire a private management company, or turn the school over to a charter school operator.

Few districts in Florida have chosen the charter route; most have elected to change the staff and provide extra support from school system personnel.

Bileca said he believes parents should be part of the decision-making process.

If his bill were to pass, it would apply to low-performing schools where the school district has already intervened. If the reforms didn't spur improvements after one year, a majority of parents could petition to "pull the trigger" and choose another one of the options.

The bill goes beyond the so-called trigger, giving parents the right to know if their child's teacher has received unsatisfactory evaluations over time – and to be made aware of virtual instruction options from a teacher with better track record. The same would hold for teachers who are teaching out of field.

Backing the legislation: The Florida Chamber of Commerce and The Foundation for Florida's Future, an education think tank created by former Gov. Jeb Bush that supports school accountability and choice.

"So often, parents are limited in how they can influence what goes on in the school system," said Patricia Levesque, the foundation's executive director. "This gives parents a legit seat at the bargaining table."

But the proposal has been a lightning rod.

Don Kearns, of the grassroots education advocacy group Support Dade Schools, said he opposes the bill because it would serve the financial interests of charter schools.

"Charter school operators are heavily invested in this type of thinking," Kearns said. "We shouldn't be turning our schools over to them. School districts like Miami-Dade have done a phenomenal job in bringing up the test scores."

Kearns also had concerns as a taxpayer.

"We'd be turning over public assets, some of which are still being paid for by the public, to a charter school operator with no real oversight," Kearns said.

Bileca, the House sponsor, said he envisioned the school districts maintaining ownership of the school facilities, though the text of the bill doesn't address that point.

A House education panel will take up the proposal Tuesday morning. A Senate education panel will hear the bill in the afternoon.

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Florida Education Commissioner defends Florida school grade ranking

Associated Press

By: Bill Kaczor

January 23, 2012

<http://www.ocala.com/article/20120123/APN/1201231091>

Education Commissioner Gerard Robinson said a test-based ranking of the state's school districts released Monday is designed to start a conversation, not stigmatize those on the bottom of the list.

Critics, though, said that's exactly what the ranking will do. They also said it's unfair, simplistic and misleading to compare districts solely according to their students' scores on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, or FCAT, without taking into account such differences as poverty levels, minority enrollment rates and size.

Robinson said the idea of the ranking system was jointly created by he and Gov. Rick Scott. The commissioner said his interest was in increasing the dialogue about education while Scott's focus was on transparency and establishing metrics to compare

the districts.

Given the criticism and high media interest, the ranking has succeeded in getting people talking, Robinson said.

"Stigmatizing isn't something that this is intended to do," he said although acknowledging some districts have more challenges with poverty and socio-economic issues than others.

"The ranking isn't going to make that any worse, but what it will do is provide an opportunity for local community leaders to say 'What can we do as a community?'" Robinson said.

The ranking gives will shine a light on those doing well and encourage districts to share ideas, Scott said.

"We have the opportunity to let people know who is doing well," he said.

St. Johns County, which includes St. Augustine, ranked No. 1. Madison, a small rural county in north Florida where more than 70 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, ranked last among the 67 districts.

"It hurts morale," said Madison School Superintendent Lou Miller. "It's very damaging to be ranked like this. ... We have lots of successful students and successful programs. Being ranked 67th out of 67 on just FCAT scores doesn't really tell the whole story."

St. Johns Superintendent Joseph Joyner declined to boast, saying: "All of our school districts in Florida are focused on high expectations and accountability."

The ranking mirrors school and district grades released last June. It shows 30 districts received an A, 23 a B, 13 a C and only one - Madison - a D.

"This kind of gives you an idea of how crazy the whole testing culture had become in Florida," said Mark Pudlow, spokesman for the Florida Education Association, the statewide teachers union. He said the FCAT should be used to assess individual students, not as "a blunt instrument to reward and punish people."

The ranking, though, drew praise from Patricia Levesque, executive director of the Foundation for Florida's Future. Former Gov. Jeb Bush, who launched the school grading system, created the foundation to advocate for his policies.

"This additional level of transparency will better equip parents and community leaders to be more involved," Levesque said in a statement.

Wayne Blanton, executive director of the Florida School Boards Association, said educators don't mind transparency but that socio-economic and demographic factors also should be considered. He said the 10 lowest-ranking districts also have the highest percentages of minority and migrant students.

State Sen. Bill Montford, a Tallahassee Democrat who also is CEO of the Florida Association of District School Superintendents, said the rankings would look very different if based on financial management or progress by minority students or other factors.

"If you're going to rank them, put everything on the table," Montford said.

Robinson said the FCAT-based ranking is just the first step in an evolving accountability effort.

"I don't see this as the end-all," he said. He said the state soon will come out with another report that includes other variables.

Miami-Dade County Superintendent Alberto Carvalho said data scientists and statisticians warn against such comparisons without taking into account differences in size, poverty and the enrollment rates of minority and language-deficient students.

"To leave those considerations out is to simply ignore them, and that is not acceptable," Carvalho said. "If all you're after is a simplistic, potentially politically manipulated set of results then you provide a simple ranking."

Robinson acknowledged the ranking, also listing the names of the superintendent and school board chairman for each district, could be fodder for political campaigns, but he said district and school grades, test scores and other information already are public information.

Carvalho said it doesn't make sense to compare Miami-Dade, the state's largest district with small rural districts. He said a single school in his district, which has 350,000 students, has several times more students than the 1,500 tested in tiny Gilchrist County.

Miami-Dade was tied for 34th place with Orange and Pasco counties. No urban districts made the top 10. The highest grades went to small and medium-size districts. Ranked behind St. Johns, in order, were Santa Rosa, Martin, Sarasota, Gilchrist, Okaloosa, Seminole, Brevard, Monroe and Sumter.

The Department of Education sent out separate news releases for each of the top 10 districts including comments from their

superintendents and praise from Robinson.

There was no release for Madison. Miller said her teachers and staffers have known since the district grades came out in June that they were last.

"We talked about the fact that is where we are but that this certainly doesn't define who we are," she said.

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Advocates tout new Ohio special needs scholarship

Associated Press

By: Staff

January 23, 2012

<http://www.wftv.com/ap/ap/ohio/advocates-tout-new-ohio-special-needs-scholarship/nG6Z3/>

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Advocates of expanding school vouchers in Ohio are touting a new state program that awards scholarships to students with special needs to help pay tuition at private or public schools that would better serve them.

School Choice Ohio pushed for the scholarship's inclusion in the state budget that took effect this past July.

The scholarship amount is based on the severity of the student's disability, but couldn't exceed \$20,000. State officials will likely begin accepting applications next month for the 2012-2013 school year.

Eligible students must be between the ages of 5 and 22, and identified by the public school district as having a disability.

The money could be used to support the student at another school or participating provider if the student's public school couldn't cover needs.

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