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NATIONAL NEWS

- 1) [Opinion: Education must move center stage in the presidential election](#); Klein – Washington Post
- 2) [Startups Seek to Master the Education Market](#); Shah – Education Week

STATE NEWS

- 3) [Florida Senate committee keeps school 'parent-trigger' bill alive](#); McGrory – Tampa Bay Times
- 4) [Instructor at N.C. Virtual Named Online Teacher of the Year](#); Quillen – Education Week
- 5) [New Jersey Gov. Christie talks education reform on televised 'Morning Joe' appearance](#); Rizzo – Statehouse Bureau
- 6) [Colorado: Online bills move into spotlight](#); Engdhal – Education News Colorado

NATIONAL NEWS

Opinion: Education must move center stage in the presidential election

Washington Post

By: Joel Klein

March 4, 2012

http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/education-must-move-center-stage-in-the-presidential-election/2012/03/02/gIQA PN X Wr R_story.html

Joel Klein is chief executive of News Corp.'s education division. From 2002 to 2010 he was chancellor of the New York City Department of Education, the largest public school system in the United States.

Until former senator Rick Santorum called President Obama “[a snob](#)” last month for wanting all Americans to attend college, education had been practically invisible in this presidential campaign. [Only 1 percent](#) of the time and questions in Republican debates have touched on schools since an education forum I co-moderated in New York in October.

This is crazy. Does any parent or CEO in America think [education](#) is 1 percent of the agenda in an age of global competition? Unless voters insist that candidates give education the attention it deserves, this will be another political season in which both sides offer pabulum without seeking a mandate for the ambitious reforms our schools require.

New research shows that only [one-quarter](#) of America's 52 million K-12 students perform on par with the average performance of the world's five best school systems — which are now in Singapore, Hong Kong, Finland, Taiwan and South Korea. Even worse is U.S. performance in advanced achievement in math and science, the best predictor of the engineering and scientific prowess that will drive future growth. Sixteen countries produce at least twice the percentage of [advanced math students](#) we do, according to research from Harvard and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. The United States spends more on schools than most wealthy nations as a share of GDP yet ranks in the middle to the bottom of the pack on international comparisons. [McKinsey estimates](#) that the cost of this achievement gap vs. other nations is up to \$2 trillion a year — the equivalent of a permanent national recession.

The conventional wisdom holds that education “doesn't work” as a central issue in presidential campaigns. What little talk there is on schools aims to shore up union support (among Democrats) and demonstrate “compassion” to independent voters or anti-federal credentials (among Republicans). Meanwhile, the countries out-educating us view education as central to their success. When the future of our economy and society turn on our ability to dramatically upgrade the skills of all our children, how can we view it as anything less?

Americans must demand from candidates concrete ideas on how to prepare our children to thrive in a global age. A serious debate would compel all seeking the White House to explain how they would do three big things:

1. Accelerate common standards. Most of our industrial competitors have rigorous national standards in education. The United States has a patchwork of largely inadequate standards whose expectations for student learning vary wildly depending on whether children live in Albany or Albuquerque. (This because, the joke goes, the right hates “national” and the left hates “standards.”) The accountability regime set up by No Child Left Behind likewise left the design of standards to the states. The result has been what many consider a “race to the bottom,” as states eased requirements to create the illusion of progress.

State leaders have recently forged a consensus on a path to Common Core Standards in English language arts and mathematics.

My question: Do candidates support the push for Common Core Standards (as Obama does)? Although adoption is ultimately a state decision, how would the next president speed implementation so we don't lose another decade without the rigor our competitors insist on for their children?

2. Professionalize teaching. There is almost universal consensus that effective teaching is the most powerful way to improve student performance. But we're not serious as a nation about making teaching an attractive career. Finland, Singapore and South Korea recruit 100 percent of their teachers from the top third of high school and college students. Their teachers train in prestigious institutions that accept only one of every seven or eight applicants. By contrast, only 23 percent of new U.S. teachers come from the top third (14 percent for high-poverty schools). Our teachers are trained mostly in open-enrollment institutions seen as second-rate; poor pay and working conditions compel the best to leave the classroom within a few years. A trade union mentality makes it hard to reward excellence and promote accountability.

My question: How do candidates propose to professionalize teaching and make it the career of choice for our most talented young people?

3. Promote choice and innovation. Whether a public school performs well or badly, it basically keeps students in that neighborhood, because most families have no other choice. This monopoly leaves no incentive to innovate to improve performance and efficiency — inducements as vital to public schools as they are elsewhere. Families with more means can choose private schools, can move to another town or can otherwise navigate the system. Those families who are least powerful, however, remain trapped. To support choice and innovation, we need to provide real funding equity and ensure that money follows children, not schools. Child-centered funding would give entrepreneurial educators the ability to reimagine how teachers and students do their work, and to compete to serve families with breakthrough pedagogical tools that creatively tap new learning technologies.

My question: How will candidates promote choice and innovation to improve teaching and learning, and unleash the power of technologies that have raised quality and lowered costs in every other part of the economy?

There is still time for a real debate on improving our schools. The stakes are too high to let platitudes substitute for the call to action our educational system needs.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

Startups Seek to Master the Education Market

Education Week

By: Nirvi Shah

March 5, 2012

[http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/03/07/23biz-startup.h31.html?](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/03/07/23biz-startup.h31.html?tkn=ZRTF14vSevjtRQPTqo68rhnhs2MAY2154O5k&cmp=clp-edweek&intc=EW-BE0312-EWH)

[tkn=ZRTF14vSevjtRQPTqo68rhnhs2MAY2154O5k&cmp=clp-edweek&intc=EW-BE0312-EWH](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/03/07/23biz-startup.h31.html?tkn=ZRTF14vSevjtRQPTqo68rhnhs2MAY2154O5k&cmp=clp-edweek&intc=EW-BE0312-EWH)

Less than a year ago, Sam Chaudhary and Liam Don met at the University of Cambridge in England during a so-called [startup weekend](#), an event where would-be entrepreneurs, Web designers, and software developers gathered to brainstorm for 54 hours straight.

The two had coffee in London about a month later and hatched an idea. Within days, they had applied to an American business-incubator program for education entrepreneurs, and by last August, they had launched [Class Dojo](#), a classroom-management tool for teachers, which has grown significantly in schools since it was launched.

Even a few years ago, this Silicon Valley-esque story might not have had such a happy beginning. While it remains to be seen whether Class Dojo will cut it, the Palo Alto-based company got traction, and quickly, despite the still uncertain state of the American economy.

The company's route to success and its entrepreneurial founders reflect a shift in the economic climate for those who want to break into the education business, and in the motivation of those would-be entrepreneurs. Mr. Chaudhary had studied quantitative economics in college and ended up teaching high school economics while Mr. Don had studied computer science.

"It's what we both knew: There's a lot of problems in education. There's a lot of room to be solving problems," Mr. Chaudhary said. "And we were both looking to do something meaningful."

For decades, industry giants have ruled the education sector. A few textbook companies, testing providers, transportation companies, and school meal providers have "owned" district and state education business because they have something small companies don't: the financial resources to weather hard times and slow budget cycles, said Douglas Lynch, the vice dean of the graduate school of education at the University of Pennsylvania.

Established companies, he said, can afford to wait out the district budget cycle, spend time lobbying school board members who have differing opinions, and travel from district to district demonstrating their products.

In addition, big companies have clung to their monopolies because investors were reluctant to dive into the education sector.

"The timeline is slower," Mr. Lynch said of the education market. "If classic venture capital is 36 months for 118 percent growth, in education it might be seven years."

On top of that, while the American K-12 marketplace may seem large, with roughly 15,000 school districts, he said, "there's no real market. There's 99,000 teeny tiny markets. It's hard to go viral quickly."

Newcomers are fighting an uphill battle in that marketplace.

"In education, everybody's looking for the algorithm, the panacea—that we're going to find one thing and scale it to everybody," said Mr. Lynch, whose university has paired with the Milken Family Foundation several times to run an [education business startup-plan competition](#), which awards cash prizes for the best ideas.

"It's not a healthy ecosystem," he said. "There's no way to nurture, grow, and greenhouse" new ideas that may apply to a niche.

At least, he said, not until very recently.

To begin with, the flow of venture capital into the K-12 market has exploded over the past year, reaching its highest transaction values in a decade in 2011, and surpassing even the flow of venture capital into higher education. The increase is attributed to a heightened interest in educational technology, a drop in the cost of electronic devices that can be used for teaching and learning, and the movement toward a standardized curriculum through the Common Core State Standards.

Spurring Activity

That sets the stage for more support for startups.

Beyond the increased influx of venture capital into K-12, Mr. Lynch outlines other factors that are helping create a more favorable environment for startups, including:

- The first federal Investing in Innovation, or i3, competition poured \$650 million into projects aimed at advancing innovative approaches in education. The program is now in its third phase.
- The [NewSchools Venture Fund](#)—a nonprofit venture philanthropy fund based in Oakland, Calif., that has put nearly \$200 million into education projects since 1998—just created a new fund, the seed fund, intended specifically to invest in early-stage education technology companies "often overlooked by the traditional investing community because of their focus on schools."
- The 2-year-old nonprofit [StartI](#), based in New York City, partners with other organizations working on incubation or acceleration of education technology innovations.
- One time startup [Grockit](#), an online test-prep site based in San Francisco that mixes study with social networking, has hosted several startup weekends focused on education and has many more in the works.
- [Imagine K12](#), a for-profit venture capital firm based in Palo Alto, Calif., was formed last year to provide training and capital because "building the right [education] products and getting those products to market will remain a very special sort of challenge." (Class Dojo was a member of Imagine K12's inaugural training class.)
- The [Kauffman Labs Education Ventures Program](#), an offshoot of the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation in Kansas City, Mo., last year provided four months of intensive training to 23 education entrepreneurs.

At the same time, big names in and outside education have been espousing the potential of education technology, the medium of most education startups, said John Bailey, the director of the Washington-based [Whiteboard Advisors](#), which provides research and strategic support to those looking for an understanding of the education policy and business environment.

"More tech luminaries are talking about ed tech," he said. He cited such people as Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates, Netflix Chief Executive Officer Reed Hastings, and the [New York City-based venture capitalist Fred Wilson](#).

"You have A-list players talking about this and expressing an interest in the space," Mr. Bailey said.

Internet-Powered Change

Along with the influx of cash, coaching, and other attention to education startups, the Internet has contributed heavily to the potential for such startups to succeed.

"The Internet allows for a new mode of distribution into schools," said Tim Brady, one of the three founders of Imagine K12, who are all Silicon Valley veterans. "Back when we started companies in the '90s, you had to raise \$1 million from a venture capital firm. That would go to buy computers. You would hire someone to manage your computers and just to put up your website.

"Now," Mr. Brady said, "for \$10 a month, someone can replicate the same thing on Amazon's Web services."

Harnessing that power was part of the strategy at [GoalBook](#). It's essentially a version of an IEP or individualized education plan—a document that outlines the goals and progress for a student with disabilities—that can be updated in real time. GoalBook was chosen to take part in Kauffman's training program and Imagine K12's incubator sessions last year. Imagine K12 helps its selected entrepreneurs work on developing a business strategy, crafting a product design, or forming a network of educators who can test products.

GoalBook, in Palo Alto, Calif., has several founding-partner districts that are paying customers, said Daniel Jhin Yoo, the former special education teacher and software developer who created GoalBook. But the venture has several thousand people using GoalBook for free.

"Our hope is that they love it, and it helps them and their colleagues, and then they have a conversation with a decision maker in the district who might be interested," he said.

But because the startup playing field has been leveled by using technology, "it puts all the startups on notice: You cannot just put a product out and rest on your laurels. You've got to keep moving," Imagine K12 founder Alan Louie said. "And that's the best thing for consumers. They get choice. They get to pick the product that best serves their needs."

In essence, he said, there can be multiple solutions to the same student and classroom challenges.

Predicting Potential Pitfalls

As much as technology is influencing startups, both in how easily an idea can become reality and in how quickly it can be distributed, it can also pose a problem if entrepreneurs overestimate how much technology is available in a typical school.

In an unexpected twist, one of the presenters at the Milken-Penn competition last year ended up telling the audience why his product shouldn't be a winner. The product, [GoalPost](#), was intended to be a social-networking platform for students to share their reading habits. Students could review books and recommend books to friends while their teachers tracked what they read. Recommendations for books would pop up when students logged in, based on what else they had read, à la Netflix or Amazon.

But creator Matt Pasternack, a former teacher who has since moved on to other projects, realized that despite the backing of a children's book publisher and several school districts, schools wouldn't have enough computer access to make the most of the program.

"The platform of the classroom is still paper," Mr. Lynch of the University of Pennsylvania said. "It was so much extra work for the teacher to do this. [Mr. Pasternack] gave a presentation about why we should not pick him."

Despite that cautionary tale, education entrepreneurs who believe in their ideas are undeterred.

They include a former mechanical engineer for Disney, Melissa Pickering. She wants to inspire others to enter the engineering field, especially young women.

After working for a few years, Ms. Pickering joined a research center at Tufts University, in Medford, Mass., and converted the center's work into [iCreate to Educate](#). It's an application that allows students to create models of, say, a scientific process like photosynthesis and turn them into movies. Students need basic craft supplies, such as pipe cleaners and construction paper, a computer, and a Web-based video camera.

"We were trying to figure out a way to give students an alternative method of developing their understandings in science," Ms. Pickering said.

Her company, launched in 2010, was chosen to participate in Kauffman's Education Ventures program. And it has another advantage over typical education entrepreneurs: The idea for iCreate came while Tufts researchers were still in action.

"We're lucky in that the product was about 80 percent developed when we launched the company," Ms. Pickering said. Because of a \$500,000 grant from the National Science Foundation, she hasn't had to spend a lot of time looking for investors to get her idea off the ground.

She said she quickly learned that early, expensive efforts to market her product at conferences were unnecessary: Now, teachers who use iCreate have become its de facto ambassadors.

Despite the many new channels that have opened for education entrepreneurs, the fresh sources of funds, and a new attitude of entrepreneurship for the greater good, the education startup environment still has room for improvement, Mr. Lynch said.

"There's definitely a thirst for this, and a need for it," he said of education entrepreneurship. "It just needs more catalysts."

Those catalysts, and in turn the companies and products they help cultivate, could have a powerful effect on education as people now know it, said Farb Nivi, the founder of Grockit.

"There may be a point when we look back at this time ... as being absolutely critical to education reform," he said. "People are willing to try new things; they need to do more with less resources."

[\(Back to top\)](#)

STATE NEWS

Florida Senate committee keeps school 'parent-trigger' bill alive

Tampa Bay Times

By: Kathleen McGrory

March 4, 2012

<http://www.tampabay.com/news/education/k12/article1218317.ece>

TALLAHASSEE — One of this year's most hotly debated education bills has become even more contentious.

At an unusual Saturday morning meeting, the Senate Budget Committee gave the green light to the so-called parent trigger bill.

The proposal, a priority for former Gov. Jeb Bush, would allow parents at low-performing schools to demand sweeping changes, including having the school converted into a charter school.

Sen. Lizbeth Benacquisto, the sponsor, said the 13-7 vote in favor of the bill represented an important step toward reforming the state's long struggling public schools.

But Senate Democrats left fuming.

For one, lawmakers weren't given a chance to debate the proposal. And members of the public weren't able to provide testimony until after the votes had been counted.

"This is not in the best interest of children," said Sen. Nan Rich, D-Weston, vowing to fight the bill on the Senate Floor. "This is about for-profit charter school companies coming in and trying to make a large footprint in Florida."

The parent trigger bill has been among the most controversial education proposals this year.

Supporters say it has the potential to help chronically struggling schools by harnessing the power of parents. They point to provisions that would require low-performing schools to inform parents when their children are assigned to low-performing or out-of-field teachers.

But opponents contend the bill was written to benefit for-profit charter school management companies by giving them access to public schools. They worry Florida's more rigorous school grading formula, expected to kick in later this year, will result in hundreds more failing schools — and more opportunities for charter school companies to win contracts.

The bill passed last week in the House. But it had stalled in the Senate, and had one final committee stop before reaching the Senate floor.

On Friday, backers of the bill attempted to fast track the proposal in the Senate. But a bipartisan coalition blocked the move in a tense 21-19 vote.

The Senate Budget Committee was called to hear the bill early Saturday morning.

At the meeting, Senate Budget Chairman JD Alexander, R-Lake Wales, gave the committee only an hour to tackle 14 amendments to the already controversial bill.

The move drew criticism from several Democrats and Republican Sen. Evelyn Lynn, R-Ormond Beach.

"This is an important bill," said Lynn. "We are putting a time certain on something that is going to affect our children's lives forever? Horrendous."

There was no time for debate. Only one parent was able to provide testimony.

Lynn joined six Democrats in opposition.

Alexander did allow more than an hour of public testimony after the meeting, and many of the Senators stuck around.

Democrats cried foul, noting that parents and other members of the public had been unable to speak last week when the proposal was heard in the Senate PreK-12 Budget Subcommittee.

"We're going to work very hard to get the votes needed to defeat this bill," said Rich, who is planning a press conference on the issue for 9:30 a.m. Monday.

Benacquisto, the sponsor, was also gearing up for a battle. "Our kids deserve the very best," she said.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

Instructor at N.C. Virtual Named Online Teacher of the Year

Education Week

By: Ian Quillen

March 2, 2012

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/DigitalEducation/2012/03/instructor_at_nc_virtual_named.html

Online biology teacher Leslie Fetzer of the North Carolina Public Virtual School was named the National Online Teacher of the Year Thursday at the Southern Regional Education Board's annual ed-tech symposium in Atlanta, according to a [press release](#).

Fetzer, who beat out two other finalists and an initial field of instructors from public and state virtual schools in 26 states, is in her third year teaching biology online to students in grades 10-12 after working entirely in the face-to-face classroom for the first six years of her nine-year career, according to the release. She was nominated by her chief academic officer.

She succeeds Kristin Kipp of the 21st-Century Virtual Academy in Colorado as the third teacher to win the award, given jointly by the SREB and the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, or iNACOL. (Kipp [sat down with the Digital Education Blog for a Q&A](#) last April.)

With the honor, Fetzer will become a representative for online teachers at education events across the country, and will also be recognized at iNACOL's annual meeting.

Georgia Virtual School's Asherrie Yisrael and the South Carolina Virtual School Program's Tracy Seiler were the competition's other finalists.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

New Jersey Gov. Christie talks education reform on televised 'Morning Joe' appearance

NJ.com

By: Salvador Rizzo

March 2, 2012

http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2012/03/gov_christie_talks_education_r.html

FORT LEE — Gov. Chris Christie essentially took over the MSNBC program "Morning Joe" today in a special episode on education reform broadcast from Fort Lee High School.

During its second hour, the event even morphed into a supercharged version of Christie's signature town hall — the crowd was local, but the lights, the cameras and most celebrity guests were imported for an hour-long discussion on the governor's education proposals.

In a litany familiar to most New Jerseyans, the Republican emphasized the need for broad changes in the way teachers are recruited, paid, evaluated and granted tenure, saying the key to rescuing students in failing urban districts is tougher accountability measures for educators.

He was also busy off-camera, shaking hands and posing for pictures, schmoozing with the program's hosts and striking up conversation with the Democratic guests including the Rev. Al Sharpton.

"I don't agree with Governor Christie on a lot," Sharpton said on the air. "I mean, we won't even agree we were here this morning."

But, he added, "we've got to create a climate where the children — the students — see that leaders in society can come together on something, and that's the future of the country with education."

Newark School Superintendent Cami Anderson, another guest on the program, said there was a "critical mass" in her city urging for education reform.

Also on hand was Michelle Rhee, the former schools chancellor in Washington, who said teacher evaluations and other policies championed by Christie have gained traction nationwide in recent years.

Christie also took advantage of the wide audience to once again criticize Vincent Giordano, executive director of the New Jersey Education Association, who said in a recent interview that "life isn't fair" for some students stuck in failing schools. The governor said union members could probably spend their dues on better things than Giordano's \$350,000 salary.

"Good teachers, awful union," he said.

Rhee added that some unions spend money to "disparage people like Chris Christie, who are actually trying to unlock a very, very difficult situation," when they could be spending that money in the classroom.

While the governor has been a frequent guest on "Morning Joe," today's wall-to-wall treatment put him on a new level.

"Be nice, Chris," the co-host, Mika Brzezinski, warned knowingly before he took questions from the audience.

"These are my people, this is Jersey," Christie said. "I know how to handle it."

[\(Back to top\)](#)

Colorado: Online bills move into spotlight

Education News Colorado

By: Todd Engdhal

March 4, 2012

<http://www.ednewscolorado.org/2012/03/04/34206-online-bills-move-into-spotlight>

There's been only low-key discussion of online education during the 2012 legislative session, but that may start changing.

The House Education Committee on Monday afternoon will consider House Bill 12-1306, which would allow compensation for districts that receive students after the annual Oct. 1 enrollment count. Under current law, districts don't receive per-pupil funding for such students.

There's been criticism that some online schools let students go too easily after the count, and that those kids end up in traditional schools.

HB 12-1306 would allow a district to apply for additional funding if its spring count of students taking statewide tests is higher than its Oct. 1 count.

The bill is sponsored by Republican Rep. Chris Holbert of Parker and Sen. Keith King of Colorado Springs. King believes the problem of unfunded students is less serious than critics argue, and because of that he hints the measure may be more of a "statement" bill than anything else.

The legislative staff [fiscal note](#) analyzing the bill puts the annual cost at \$875,818, a small amount in the context of more than \$5 billion in annual spending on K-12 schools. The fiscal note says, "The majority of school districts and institute charter schools lose enrollment between the October 1 student count day and the administration of the CSAP tests. Over the past five years, an average of 29 districts increased enrollment annually. The total number of additional students is, on average, 150 students."

Also on tap this week is House Bill 12-1124, scheduled in the Senate Education Committee on Wednesday. The measure, by Rep. Tom Massey, R-Poncha Springs, would direct the state Department of Education to hire an outside consultant to conduct a comprehensive study of "digital learning," with the study hopefully providing a basis for later policy decisions.

Massey has tried to keep his bill clear of controversies around the effectiveness, funding and oversight of full-time online education. He wants the study to cover not only online schools but also blended programs that combine online and in-school work and use of technology in the classroom.

Watching from the wings is Sen. Pat Steadman, D-Denver, who says he's considering an online bill to improve oversight of such programs. Senate President Brandon Shaffer, D-Longmont, had promised legislation to "rein in" online programs. But Shaffer is running for Congress, making him a partisan target at the Capitol and putting a handicap on any controversial bill that carries his name.

Steadman said last week he hasn't decided what to include in his legislation and he's watching what happens with other bills, including the two being heard this week.

It's also possible that amendments affecting online education could be added to House Bill 12-1240, a measure whose broad title could include a wide range of education subjects. That bill gained some unexpected amendments last week in House Education, sparking a partisan spat – [see story](#).

Online amendments also could find a home in the annual school finance bill, expected to be introduced later this month, or in a still-to-be-fleshed-out overhaul of school finance laws that Sen. Mike Johnston, D-Denver, is considering.

Last fall, Shaffer sought an emergency audit of online programs but was rebuffed by the Legislative Audit Committee.

[\(Back to top\)](#)