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NATIONAL NEWS

New Study Finds Parent Engagement on Rise

Education Week

By: Michele Molnar

March 12, 2012

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/parentsandthepublic/2012/03/trending_up_new_study_finds_parent_engagement_on_rise.html

While teacher satisfaction has declined to its lowest point in more than two decades, parent engagement is climbing to new heights across America, a new survey reports.

And parent engagement turns out to be important for teachers as well as for students. In fact, it appears to play a key role for those teachers who are happier with their jobs, according to the "[MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Teachers, Parents and the Economy.](#)"

the 28th in an annual series commissioned by MetLife and conducted by Harris Interactive.

A 15 percent drop in teachers' satisfaction ratings between 2009 and 2011 can be attributed—at least in part—to the economy and educational budget cuts, as *Education Week's* Teacher Blogger Liana Heitin [reports about the "teacher satisfaction" portion of the survey.](#)

But the report also says, "The teachers with higher job satisfaction are likelier to report greater involvement of parents and their schools in coming together to improve the learning and success of students."

To assess attitudes about public education, MetLife/Harris reached out to three constituent groups: parents, teachers, and students. The survey was conducted by telephone among 1,001 public school teachers, and online among 1,086 parents and 947 students in October and November 2011.

Levels of engagement between parents and schools have seen marked improvement over past surveys.

Two-thirds of students (64 percent) report that they talk about things that happen at school with their parents every day, up 14 percent from 1988, the first time the survey asked this specific question.

Nearly three times as many students as in 1988 report that their parents visit their school at least once a month—46 percent, up from 16 percent.

These numbers echo what parents report.

Fewer parents now than 25 years ago believe that there is widespread parental disengagement with their children's school and education in general.

Since the first time the survey series addressed the general issue of parent engagement this issue in 1987, there has been a significant decline in the proportion of teachers and parents reporting that most or many parents take too little interest in their children's education, fail to motivate their children so they want to learn, or leave their children alone too much after school.

Most teachers (91 percent) and eight in ten parents believe that their schools help all parents understand what they can do at home to support student success, and 83 percent of students agree that their teachers and parents work together to help them succeed.

Teachers are more likely to receive good reviews in places where parents are highly involved.

"Parents of students in schools with high parent engagement are more likely than those with low engagement to rate their child's teachers as 'excellent' or 'good' on a range of measures, including: being responsive to their requests for information (98 percent vs. 57 percent), contacting them if their child is having academic or social problems (97 percent vs. 50 percent), providing guidance on what they can do to help their child succeed (96 percent vs. 41 percent), and being flexible to meet with them at different times of day or different locations (91 percent vs. 47 percent)."

Areas to Work On

The report finds that there is room for improvement in parent engagement, "particularly for secondary schools and schools with larger proportions of high-needs students."

Typically, parents depend upon their child, the child's teachers, and written communication from the school for information. "However, other sources of information such as the PTA/PTO, other parents, parent/community liaisons, and the principal emerge as particularly important resources for urban, minority, or lower-income parents, and those parents with no more than a high school education," the report's authors write.

Joyce Epstein, founder and director of the [National Network of Partnership Schools](#), located at Johns Hopkins University, in Baltimore, believes improvement can come from strengthened school/community partnerships.

"Although it's very encouraging that family and community involvement has increased over time across the country, this is by no means an accomplished goal," she said.

Epstein pointed to the survey results in which students identified issues that create a poor learning environment. Those include the 5 percent of high school students who said that their school could not be described as "safe," the 7 percent of middle school students and 10 percent of high school students who said that their school could be described as "too noisy to concentrate," and the 10 percent of students who worry about being bullied at school. Beyond that, 16 percent of students say they worry about their parents losing a job, or being unable to find one.

"Because there are over 88,000 public schools in this country, the seemingly small percentages really affect around 7 to 10 million students and families in poor urban and poor rural communities," she said. "The progress noted is excellent, but there are still great challenges ahead."

To access the 122-page new survey, download the MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Teachers, Parents and the Economy [here](#).

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Single-District Virtual Ed. Seen Growing Fastest

Education Week

By: Katie Ash

March 12, 2012

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/03/15/25deploy.h31.html?r=2008889434>

Single-district online learning programs were the fastest-growing sector of virtual learning in the United States in 2011. Whether it is to provide more options for students, keep more students from seeking virtual learning options outside the school district, or simply to move toward 21st-century teaching and learning, many districts are launching and sustaining their own virtual learning programs.

As districts move in this direction, they are taking a harder look at how they will evaluate their local models of virtual education, which is gaining popularity even though reviews on its effectiveness compared with that of more traditional approaches are still mixed.

"District administrators in close to half of all states know that they are losing students to online schools," says John Watson, the founder of the Evergreen Education Group, a Durango, Colo.-based organization that researches online learning, and an author of the ["Keeping Pace With K-12 Online Learning" report](#), which tracks annual trends in online learning.

As districts without virtual learning options lose students to online programs, they also lose per-pupil enrollment aid, siphoning precious dollars from district budgets.

In addition, Watson says, plenty of successful blended and virtual learning options are now out there, making district administrators more confident about taking the leap to online education.

"It's not a plausible response to say, 'It's not time. It's not proven yet,' " he says. "It's clear that online and blended learning can work, and there are examples of it working."

Keeping students in the 36,000-student Aurora Public School district was a main impetus to opening [APS Online](#), says Randy Wood, the principal of the school in Aurora, Colo.

"When we first started, the superintendent came to me and said, 'We have 1,100 kids each year leaving the district to seek an online option,' " he says. "We felt we could provide something of high quality for our students that would keep them in the district."

The high school was launched in January 2010 with 50 students; it has since grown to two campuses and 230 full-time virtual students. (According to state law, the school can only admit 9 students or less from other districts.)

"We have students coming to us for a variety of reasons," says Wood. "Whether it's kids that just want to accelerate their high school learning, kids who are working full time to support their families or themselves, or students with medical conditions."

The program uses a largely self-paced curriculum purchased from the Scottsdale, Ariz.-based curriculum provider e2020, and each student is required to come into one of the campuses at least twice a week, says Wood. Each campus has two full-time teachers to help students with academic work and career planning and to provide mentoring.

"Our teachers become more like counselors and mentors to these kids," Wood says.

In addition, he says, students who do not have Internet access are provided with a netbook and an Internet stipend. About 60 percent of the students take advantage of those resources, while 40 percent already had Internet access and computers to do their coursework.

To ensure quality and accountability at the school, APS Online, like all the high schools in the district, develops a Unified Improvement Plan based on scores from the 9th and 10th grade Colorado State Assessment Program tests as well as the act college-entrance exam, taken by all 11th graders in the state. This year, APS Online is working on improving science, math, and ACT scores in the school.

In Hershey, Pa., administrators in the 3,500-student Derry Township district opened the [Hershey Online Academy](#) to help retain students in the district as well.

Started in fall 2011, the cyber school enrolled 14 students in grades 9-12 as of early 2012.

Once plans for the online school were under way, Joe McFarland, the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction for the district, called all the district families that had moved their children to online programs elsewhere to inform them of the new option.

"They wished this would have been an opportunity years ago," he says. Many of the students and parents were interested in the program, but did not want to switch back into the district because of concerns about how that might affect the students' dates of graduation, he says. That's one of the reasons the district is looking at expanding the online academy to middle school.

"They can graduate with a Derry Township diploma and have that connection and opportunity to participate in some ... extracurricular activities that they can't if they're outside the district," says McFarland.

The district did not launch the program on its own, however. Instead, it became a member district of the [Capital Area Online Learning Association](#), or CAOLA, which serves 18 districts and schools in the Capital Area Intermediate Unit, a regional educational service agency in Pennsylvania.

Joining CAOLA made it possible for administrators in the Derry Township district to launch the school quickly and cost-effectively, says McFarland. ("[School Districts Team Up On Virtual Ed. Initiatives.](#)" this report.)

"The nice thing about the partnership ... is that you have other people who are working through it as well, and you can share ideas and strategies," he says.

Because the school is so new, a formal evaluation process to determine the overall rigor of the courses has not been put into place yet, says McFarland. Eleventh-grade students' Pennsylvania System of School Assessment scores will be compared to those in brick-and-mortar schools for a gauge, and administrators in the online school are evaluating feedback from parents and students to determine the rigor of the courses as well.

The 8,000-student [Springfield City school system](#) in Springfield, Ohio, recently began its own virtual academy for grades K-12. The decision grew out of feedback from the community about a need for more educational choices for students, says Superintendent David C. Estrop.

"We're trying to create more choices and more opportunities for us to customize and personalize the educational program for students," he says.

After the district had established five separate academies for high schoolers—the Preparatory Academy for struggling students; the Exploratory Academy for students unsure of their intended academic focus; the STEM Academy for students interested in science, technology, engineering, and math; the Health and Human Services Academy; and the International Arts and Communications Academy, which includes the district's International Baccalaureate program as well as world-language courses—virtual learning was a natural progression, says Estrop.

Although the Springfield district has offered Plato Learning courses for credit recovery over the past several years, this is its first foray into full-time online learning.

The virtual academy will use curriculum from the Jefferson County Education Service Center in Ohio, Estrop says.

"We sincerely believe that one size of learning no longer fits everyone's needs," he says. "You're no longer stuck having to learn one way at one time."

The district, whose proportion of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch is 76 percent, underwent a major technology overhaul in the spring of 2010, says Estrop. Schools were outfitted with new hardware, software, and a beefed-up network, which allowed the district to begin setting the stage for virtual learning.

"If we think of the president's goal of having everyone graduate, I don't think it can be realized unless you have many choices in terms of how that can happen, and you provide flexibility to pick from among those choices," Estrop says.

The school is using a variety of measures to evaluate the quality of the courses, says Estrop, including students' grades, performance on state assessments, and course completion rates, as well as enrollment, attendance, and discipline referrals. The school also tracks which students go on to IB or AP courses, as well as college or university programs, and it is examining feedback from parents and students to gauge their satisfaction with the program.

'Students are Changing'

Oregon's 20,600-student Hillsboro school district, just outside Portland, is gearing up to launch the [Hillsboro Online Academy](#) in fall 2012.

"This whole thing started about three years ago, when the district decided to look at options," says Linda Harrington, the principal of the virtual school. "We knew we needed to meet the needs of our students. Students are changing, life is changing, and technology is much different than it was even a short time ago."

After a community survey revealed that students and families were interested in online learning options, the district began working to make such options a reality.

"We know that there are a lot of kids who may have become disenfranchised or disengaged with the [traditional school model], so we want to make sure whatever we build is different enough so [students] feel re-engaged or re-energized," says Steve Larson, the district's assistant superintendent for school performance.

To evaluate the online program, the district will be tracking course completion rates, student achievement on state assessments, as well as graduation rates, says Larson. In addition, the district will conduct evaluations of the program to hear feedback from teachers, parents, and students mid-year and at the end of the year, he says.

"As we move forward, we expect to develop specific performance indicators of the program to ensure adequate resource alignment," he says.

Many of the details about the Hillsboro Online Academy—such as what curriculum students will use, what grades it will serve, and whether it will enroll students full time or part time—have yet to be hammered out. But district leaders say they are working with the community, and other school districts, to determine the best course of action.

"We have the benefit of partnership," says Larson. "We can tailor the experience to our district, but other districts in the state are moving as quickly as us, and we're strong enough partners that we can start to count on each other for some of the back-end stuff."

For instance, he says, the district has been meeting with the nearby Portland and Beaverton school systems to talk about such options as buying curricula together for greater purchasing power.

"We would like to see that we don't duplicate costs between districts that are a street away from each other," Larson says.

In fact, the biggest challenge in opening the Hillsboro virtual school, both Harrington and Larson say, are the budget cuts that have reduced the district's general fund.

"I don't think there's any other challenges than trying to do this in the context of budget reductions," says Larson. "Everything

else is doable. We're not finding anybody saying that this isn't the right thing to be doing. It's 'How fast can you get it up and running?' "

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Romney Adds Education Info to Campaign Site

Education Week

By: Alyson Klein

March 10, 2012

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2012/03/romney_adds_education_info_to.html

Up until now, former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, the front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination, has had a background section on his Web site letting voters know where he stands on a long list of issues—health care, China, trade—but not education.

But, today, the campaign added an [education section](#). No major policy proposals—apparently those are still to come—but the campaign does provide a quick, CliffsNotes version of Romney's record in Massachusetts, including his support for charter schools, rigorous standards, and merit pay.

He also takes a veiled pot-shot at his chief rival, former Sen. Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, who made what lots of folks considered a big gaffe when he [called](#) President Obama a "snob" for trying to ensure all kids get some kind of post-secondary education.

"Students must be encouraged to pursue that dream and work hard to achieve it. Post-secondary education cannot become a luxury for the few; instead, all students should have the opportunity to attend a college that best suits their needs. Whether it is public or private, traditional or online, college must be available and affordable," Romney's campaign says.

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STATE NEWS

New Jersey: Gov. Christie says he is not frustrated with slow-moving education reform proposals

Statehouse Bureau/NJ.com

By: Jenna Portnoy

March 13, 2012

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

BORDENTOWN— Gov. Chris Christie Monday said he is not frustrated with the slow pace of change on most of the education reforms he proposed two years ago. Not yet, anyway.

The Republican governor said he believes Democrats who control the Legislature — Senate President Steve Sweeney (D-Gloucester) and Assembly Speaker Shelia Oliver (D-Essex) — have agreed to try to advance bills that would change the rules for tenure, compensation, vouchers and charter schools.

Christie said the budget, pension and benefit reform and running for re-election kept lawmakers too busy to address his education reforms last year and in the first month of this year, same-sex marriage dominated the discourse.

"Willing to address doesn't mean pass and get on my desk. I understand the lingo," he said at a press conference in Bordentown. "When Steve or Shelia doesn't want to address something, like ethics reform, they tell me it's not going to happen. That's not what they've said about education reform."

Oliver pushed back on Christie's attempt to grab the reigns on the issue.

"The Assembly will advance its own education agenda as it sees fit, as it has for instance with the bill to require voter approval for charter schools," she said in a statement.

Chris Donnelly, a spokesman for Sweeney, said "education is certainly important" but the Senate President's priority is "providing real property tax relief."

Christie and Acting Education Commissioner Christopher Cerf went to Bordentown Regional High School to once again pitch the administration's proposals.

Last year the Legislature passed his Urban Hope Act, which gives private nonprofit groups the authority to build a total of 12 schools in Newark, Camden and Trenton. Still on deck, however, is the Opportunity Scholarship Act, which would provide students with vouchers to attend private and parochial schools.

Christie said his plan for teacher evaluation is based 65 percent of subjective measures like observation and 35 percent on testing and other objective criteria.

"Will we use it to remove ineffective teachers?" he said. "Sure we will. But I suspect what you're going to find much more than removal is you're going to see improvement of teachers."

Christie said he is not swayed by recent reports that nine schools were flagged for further investigation by the state Office of Fiscal Accountability, for possible cheating on state tests.

"I am not going to set up standards that play to the lowest common denominator just because some people might cheat to get there," he said. "It's our job to figure out the ones who are cheating and to hold them accountable for that."

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Ohio Gov. Kasich hails Cleveland school plan

The Columbus Dispatch

By: Catherine Candisky

March 13, 2012

<http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2012/03/13/cleveland-school-plan-hailed.html>

Gov. John Kasich is praying and begging for support for Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson's plan to overhaul the city's schools, saying it's a model that could be used in urban districts across Ohio.

"I'm begging you as human beings to not let this go down the drain," Kasich told the State Board of Education at its monthly meeting yesterday in Columbus.

The governor urged the 19-member board to back the plan, which might be included in a mid-biennium review of the state budget that Kasich plans to unveil on Wednesday.

"In my church (Sunday), I asked everyone to pray that people would find the courage to support Mayor Frank Jackson and what he's trying to do out of Cleveland. Because it's about kids, and it's about urban education, and it's about the country," Kasich said.

In his first public address to the State Board of Education, Kasich also apologized for his heavy-handedness with the board and the former state superintendent after he took office last year, and he previewed his education initiatives. His long-awaited school-funding formula — originally promised by last fall — will wait until next year.

Referring to the funding plan, Kasich said: "Dollars in the classroom, motivating teachers, strong core curriculum, grade evaluation — that's the way we're going to put this together."

"The problem that we're having is that 67 percent of our parents think that our public schools are just doing great, and 41 percent of our students are in remedial programs when they go to college, so there is a disconnect."

More immediately, Kasich will push to end "social promotion" by requiring schools to provide tutoring or other intervention beginning in kindergarten to students who are behind in reading, and by not allowing students to move on to fourth grade if they fail the state reading test.

"You can't be pushing kids through who can't read," he told the board.

Kasich also will call for a new and tougher grading system for schools, curriculum guidelines for digital education, and reporting academic performance at technical schools. In addition, he wants to help students find their passions and give them a clearer understanding of why school matters through opportunities to interact with business professionals and other out-of-school activities.

Afterward, some educators said the governor offered only variations of previous initiatives, such as the reading guarantee, which was tried in the late 1990s but largely repealed in 2001.

But Sen. Chris Widener, a Springfield Republican and chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, was supportive of the proposal.

"I'm sure there will still be concerns about that, but it remains a priority that kids need to be able to read at an early age, so we need to have that conversation again," Widener said.

Regarding the new grading system, Widener said it is vital that districts are informed quickly of the expectations.

"I'm concerned that we need to properly inform the districts and allow enough adequate time to let them know what the standards are and what they're going to be evaluated against, at least a year ahead of when the grade card will reflect that."

In Cleveland, Jackson has proposed removing tenure from staffing decisions, addressing low-performing schools and holding

charter schools more accountable.

The governor wants to give Cleveland schools that authority in state law as a test program, but he warned: "If we don't have Democrats involved, it won't pass."

Kasich also cautioned that Cleveland business leaders are growing impatient for reform: "I'm told the business community will walk away. They won't support levies. They are done."

Sen. Nina Turner, D-Cleveland, said she agrees with the mayor's plan "in concept," calling it "courageous and absolutely necessary" for him to push for changes.

"The sense of urgency he has in declaring that we will not lose another generation, I'm absolutely there with him 100 percent," said Turner, a graduate of Cleveland schools.

Turner said she wants to see the mayor's plan in legislative form, and she said it should be done separately from other parts of Kasich's budget plan. She agrees with trying to replicate high-performing schools, regardless of whether they're public or charter schools, but she has questions about parts of the plan related to collective bargaining.

"I don't want to see teachers vilified through this," she said.

Melissa Cropper, president of the Ohio Federation of Teachers, which represents Cleveland teachers, said the plan does not say how it would improve student performance, and it would throw out teacher contracts.

"The fresh-start contract is basically Senate Bill 5 all over again," Cropper said.

The union has been left out of discussions and its ideas have been ignored, she said. Teachers proposed "new-generations schools" with longer school days, year-round classes and added social and medical services in low-performing schools, she said.

Earlier, the governor apologized to the board for forcing the former superintendent and a board member who didn't have her paperwork in order from their jobs and triggering new elections to replace the board president.

"I hope that's behind us," he said.

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Iowa Governor Branstad Urges Bold Action on School Changes

Associated Press

By: Staff

March 12, 2012

<http://www.kcrg.com/news/local/-Governor-Branstad-Urges-Bold-Action-on-School-Changes--142325845.html>

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — Gov. Terry Branstad on Monday urged lawmakers to take bold action this week when they tackle his plan to reform Iowa's education system.

Branstad said at his weekly news conference that the state has been complacent in its kindergarten through 12th grade system, leading to falling test scores and a less prepared workforce. The governor has proposed more testing for students and tougher evaluations for teachers.

"Other states have passed aggressive education reform and put in place clear and effective standards and assessments and done a better job of improving accountability," Branstad said. "We think that is critically needed."

The House, controlled by Republicans, is scheduled on Tuesday to begin debating a school reform plan that is similar to Branstad's original proposal. The Senate, where Democrats hold a majority, has made more significant changes to Branstad's plan.

Asked about a portion of his proposal that would allow some students to take classes online, Branstad called for lawmakers to embrace new technology.

"What we want is flexibility and the opportunity to tailor the education to meet the needs of individual students," he said.

Linda Fandel, the governor's top education adviser, said the Iowa program would be similar to an effort in Florida that is designed for special cases, such as children with medical issues or students who have been bullied in school. She said less than 1 percent of students in Florida learn online.

"These kids today know more about technology than we ever did," Branstad said. "We shouldn't be preventing the use of these effective tools."

Mary Jane Cobb, executive director of the Iowa State Education Association, held a news conference later Monday and described the governor's proposal as "a mixed bag."

Cobb said teachers support the governor's emphasis on literacy in the early grades, but they largely oppose a proposal requiring that third graders pass a reading test before being advanced to fourth grade.

Cobb also said teachers are suspicious about proposed teacher evaluations. She said that leads some to conclude that the state is full of bad teachers, and that's not the case. She urged lawmakers to focus more on changes that can improve student performance.

"We need to spend a little more time on things that matter," Cobb said.

Although it's not in his plan, Branstad said he would support future changes to allow people with training in areas such as engineering and science to teach, even if they don't have teaching degrees.

Branstad said that during his tenure as president of Des Moines University, a medical school, faculty would often bring in such people.

"There is a benefit to this and a number of other states have done this, especially where they have shortages," Branstad said.

Teachers union head Mary Jane Cobb held a separate news conference, where she noted teachers see Branstad's plan as a mixed bag. She says teachers largely oppose plans to hold back third graders who don't pass reading tests.

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Florida: Opinion: Needed Reforms Succeeded in 2012 Session

Florida Voices

By: Lloyd Brown

March 12, 2012

<http://www.floridavoices.com/columns/lloyd-brown/needed-reforms-succeeded-2012-session>

Efforts to reform education in Florida faced dogged opposition in the Florida Legislature but recorded some notable success nonetheless.

The well-heeled teachers union and other special interests from the education establishment, which reformers refer to as The Blob, managed to narrowly block passage of one important piece of legislation – the “parent trigger” bill.

This proposal would give parents a voice in forcing reform upon recalcitrant politicians. It also would provide help for students saddled with under-performing teachers.

Four other states already have similar laws.

Opponents misrepresented it as a “takeover” of public schools.

“It is a sad day for Florida’s parents and students when 20 Senate members vote against giving parents the tools they need to improve their child’s persistently failing school,” said Pat Levesque of the Foundation for Florida’s Future.

It failed by one vote in the Senate. For a first effort facing powerful opposition, that was pretty impressive. Undoubtedly, it will be back again next year, giving parents and students another chance.

One successful bill will expand the Tax Credit Scholarship program, which has helped thousands of children escape from failing schools and have a decent chance at getting an education.

More than 35,000 children have been liberated through this program since it was founded by Tampa businessman John Kirtley. Most are poor and more than two-thirds are black or Hispanic. Thousands more are on the waiting list.

The program gives incentives to businesses to grant scholarships to children trapped in failing schools. Surveys show it has a high level of parental satisfaction.

In addition to saving children, the program saves Florida taxpayers millions of dollars.

It was among the standards and accountability reforms begun by Jeb Bush when he became governor. Those reforms have produced impressive results. As the Economist magazine said recently, “Controversial at the time, these reforms now have bipartisan support in Florida, where black and Hispanic pupils in particular have made huge gains.”

Since Bush succeeded in winning passage of his A+ Plan in 1999, Florida has risen from the depths of the national ranking into the top ten in education quality, according to Education Week.

Opponents have been at a loss to explain the gains, which have come without huge increases in spending that are the standard

“solution” offered by The Blob for any education problem.

Another bill will make it possible to implement accelerated learning and performance-based systems, rather than relying merely on “seat time” as a gauge for student progress. This allows students to move ahead when they are able, instead of being frustrated by repetitive instruction geared toward slower learners.

Online learning options also will be expanded.

Moving education into the 21st century is not going to be easy, but with champions like Kirtley, Bush and state Sen. John Thrasher, Florida families have reason to hope for a brighter future.

Lloyd Brown was in the newspaper business nearly 50 years, beginning as a copy boy and retiring as editorial page editor of the Florida Times-Union in Jacksonville.

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Colorado: Literacy bill advances on 10-3 vote

Education News Colorado

By: Todd Engdahl

March 12, 2012

<http://www.ednewscolorado.org/2012/03/12/34637-literacy-bill-advances-on-10-3-vote>

The House Education Committee Monday gave a full hearing – more than seven hours – to House Bill 12-1238, the proposal that would require improved literacy programs in the early elementary grades, create a preference for retention of third graders with weak reading skills and add early literacy results to the factors in the state’s accountability system for rating schools.

After dozens of witnesses and extensive committee discussion, the bill passed on a 10-3 bipartisan vote. The only no votes were Democrats Cherilyn Peniston of Westminster, Judy Solano of Brighton and Nancy Todd of Aurora, all veteran committee members and retired teachers.

The committee approved some amendments to the Colorado Early Literacy Act, but it was clear from both witness testimony and committee discussion that lots of people want more work done on the bill.

Prime sponsor Rep. Tom Massey, R-Poncha Springs, said, “We still have amendments we’re working on. ... There’s still a lot to be done. This is a work in progress.”

The serious tone of the hearing and the level of detail and analysis provided by many witnesses were in contrast to the rushed atmosphere and uninformed discussion that sometimes mark committee hearings.

Nobody’s flatly against HB 12-1238; witness after witness agreed that early literacy is a moral imperative and essential to the subsequent academic success of students.

The bill is being pushed by a coalition of education reform groups and business groups, including the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce, Colorado Succeeds, Colorado Concern, Stand for Children and the Colorado Children’s Campaign. The bill is being heavily promoted by lobbyists for those groups.

The Hickenlooper administration supports the bill, and the measure’s sponsors include a bipartisan mix of influential lawmakers in both houses.

Hickenlooper himself was the leadoff witness, telling his personal story of dyslexia and being held back in the seventh grade.

“I felt strongly that there shouldn’t be mandatory retention” in the bill, Hickenlooper said. But, he added, “There is no stronger indicator of how a kid is going to do in school” than being able to read by third grade.

But a long list of education interest groups, school districts, education, special education and literacy professionals have concerns with the bill and raised lots of polite concerns during the hours of testimony Monday.

The highest profile provision of the bill is its preference for holding back third graders who have the weakest reading skills, called “significant reading deficiency” in the bill. That standard would be defined by the State Board of Education.

For a third grader who falls in that category, parents, teachers and school administrators would be required to discuss and decide whether to hold that student back. If they decided a student shouldn’t be held back, the case would be reviewed by the district superintendent, who could decide to hold a student back.

In its original form, as proposed last year, the bill would have made retention mandatory. But there was heavy opposition to that – and reported concern from the governor’s office – so Massey dropped the mandatory idea.

Even the bill's current retention preference raised concern for many witnesses and some committee members. A couple of mothers brought their children along to the witness table to oppose the bill's retention provisions.

After testimony ended and committee deliberation began, Solano proposed an amendment to strip the retention provisions of the bill. It failed on a 5-8 vote.

The other concern that dominated the hearing was the potential cost of the program. The current version of the bill proposes taking about \$5.4 million from tobacco settlement monies and from the existing Read to Achieve program.

Massey and cosponsor Rep. Millie Hamner, D-Summit County and a former superintendent, said they're looking for additional funding. Revenue from state school lands reportedly is being eyed as a source of funds.

Solano and Todd kept raising questions about cost, and several school district witnesses made the same point.

Finally, Rep. Carole Murray said, "I guess I'm getting a little uncomfortable with all the questions about money. Why should it take (more) money to teach them ... the one thing they should be getting in school?"

Harrison district Superintendent Mike Miles testified in favor of the bill. His district has a policy to eliminate social promotion in five years by holding students back in third, fifth and eighth grades.

Asked about the cost, Miles said, "It does take a lot to get a student to read when they're far behind, but it can be done. It does take some resources. We're doing it ... mostly because we prioritize our funding in support of early literacy."

Other witnesses raised concerns about how the bill might affect special education students, about the data reporting requirements it would impose on districts and about how the bill would integrate – or conflict with – the state's overall system of academic standards, testing and school accountability.

And late in the hearing, one witness even questioned whether the bill is necessary.

Republican Peggy Littleton, a former State Board of Education who's now an El Paso County commissioner, said, "Let's use what we already have in place," citing the existing Colorado Basic Literacy Act and the state content standards. What's really needed, Littleton said, is better training of teachers in teaching literacy.

The bill now moves to the House Appropriations Committee.

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