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**Subject:** Foundation for Florida's Future, Key Reads: 11/28/11

## Foundation for Florida's Future, Key Reads: 11/28/11

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## NATIONAL NEWS

### The Future of Educational Accountability, As Envisioned by 11 Leading States

Education Next

By: Michael Petrilli

November 23, 2011

<http://educationnext.org/the-future-of-educational-accountability-as-envisioned-by-11-leading-states/>

Last week, 11 states applied for waivers from many of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act's most onerous provisions. Their applications are now [online](#), ready to be sliced and diced by any willing wonk. (Anne Hyslop of Education Sector has already [taken a cut](#).) We at Fordham have tried to make the task a little bit easier by posting two compilations: First, the [Common Core implementation plans](#) for all 11 states, and second, all of their [accountability proposals](#). Both are huge files but if your plans this weekend include a lot of downtime, have at 'em.

Personally, I'm most interested in the states' plans around accountability. Partly that's because this is the only part of this waiver process that I find [legitimate](#) and [legal](#); the Department of Education has no business demanding that states adopt and implement the Common Core standards or rigorous teacher evaluations. But if it's going to allow states to opt-out of the law's Adequate Yearly Progress system, it certainly has the right to set boundaries around the alternatives. And partly it's because the major sticking point in the current negotiations over ESEA reauthorization comes down to accountability, and how much leeway to give the states.

So what do these 11 states want to do differently on the accountability front? Particularly when it comes to identifying schools that should be subject to some sort of sanctions or interventions? Here's what the future holds if the Department of Education gives its assent:

1. A deadline for getting all kids to "proficiency" will go the way of the dinosaur. None of the states opted to set a deadline for universal proficiency. A few agreed to reduce the number of not-yet-proficient students by 50 percent over the next six years, but most developed their own twist on "annual measurable objectives."

2. A focus on growth will eclipse the need for "subgroup accountability." Models such as the one proposed by Colorado would set "annual measurable objectives" at the kid-level. Schools would be expected to help all students make enough progress to get them to a college-and-career ready standard by high school. (For high achieving students who are already approaching this standard, schools would be held accountable for making sure they grow at least a year's worth of learning every year.) This is exactly the right concept—have a real-live standard (college readiness) and ask schools to aim at getting all kids to it by graduation. That will require making the most rapid progress for the students who are furthest behind. Since those kids are more likely to be poor and from minority groups, it makes subgroup accountability per se unnecessary. (Though the Administration's guidelines still require it.)

3. Subjects beyond reading and math will count again. Seven of the states are taking the opportunity to expand the subjects included in their accountability systems. Colorado will look at writing, science, and ACT results; Florida will add writing and science; Georgia will include science and social studies for grades 3-8 and a whole suite of exit exams for high school; Kentucky and Oklahoma add science, social studies, and writing; and Massachusetts and Tennessee will both add science to the mix. This should be helpful in counteracting the narrowing of the curriculum.

In other words, the states are presenting sensible alternatives to the antiquated Adequate Yearly Progress model. That doesn't prove that "states are good" and "the feds are bad." On the contrary, it just shows that our thinking and technology around accountability have improved over the ten years since NCLB was enacted. But it does lay down a challenge to Arne Duncan, his peer reviewers, and his team: Say yes to these proposals or be accused of a "Washington knows best" mentality.

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## States' ESEA Waiver Bids Murky on Teacher Evaluations

Education Week

By: Stephen Sawchuk

November 23, 2011

[http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/teacherbeat/2011/11/states\\_esea\\_waiver\\_bids.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/teacherbeat/2011/11/states_esea_waiver_bids.html)

Only five of the 11 states that have applied for ESEA waivers have a firm mechanism in place for implementing teacher-evaluation systems statewide, according to a review of the plans.

Those guidelines, and systems for helping districts adopt them in a timely fashion, are the core teacher-quality requirement in the U.S. Department of Education's application.

This isn't a dealbreaker for getting a waiver. At least in theory, states only need to have plans in place regarding evaluations. But plans and requirements are, obviously, two very different things—just ask Hawaii, which won a Race to the Top bid, but [hasn't come to agreement with its teachers' union](#) on evaluations.

It's something that the peer reviewers could take into account as they review the applications, though [the review guidance](#) isn't particularly explicit on this point.

Anyway, without further ado, here's Teacher Beat's rundown.

Colorado, Tennessee, Indiana, Florida, Oklahoma: All five of these states have laws on the books requiring new evaluation systems. Colorado's guidelines have been developed and are now being piloted in select districts. Tennessee's new statewide evaluation system is operational, but has hit bumps in the road of late. Florida's law was extremely controversial and opposed by the state teachers' union. Nevertheless, it is very specific about what the evaluation process will look like. Indiana's law was passed this year, and while piloting is just starting, it has developed a statewide system. Oklahoma's state board is scheduled to adopt a statewide model in December.

Massachusetts: This state has adopted regulations for teacher evaluations that require all districts to create systems based on principles outlined by the state. The success of that all happening seems very dependent on the collective bargaining process, and it's not entirely clear based on my preliminary read how those two factors interact. (Please weigh in if you know more.)

Georgia: This state has statewide guidelines, and it won a Race to the Top grant. But only 26 districts out of about 180 are participating, so the evaluation plans only go that far at the moment. The application states that it will "offer" other districts the chance to adopt the new evaluations next school year (good luck with that one, Georgia!). It says that with the support of the legislature and board of education, all districts will eventually adopt the system. That probably means that the state will need either legislative or regulatory action to make it happen.

New Jersey: This state points to its evaluation task force, which has been drafting principles for evaluation, but there's no mention at all of the state teachers' union, with whom Gov. Chris Christie has constantly feuded. It's hard to see how these evaluations are going to happen absent local bargaining or a state requirement.

Minnesota: The state passed a piece of legislation this year requiring new teacher evaluations statewide, but it is only beginning the process of convening work groups to flesh out the law, which is fairly skeletal. An interesting feature of [this state's law](#) is that it allows for a portfolio-assessment process similar to National Board certification to substitute for the regular observation and student-growth process.

New Mexico: State officials have outlined the contours of an evaluation system, but need the state legislature to pass a law to overhaul its current tiered-licensing system in favor of annual evaluations.

Kentucky: This is an unusual case. According to the application, the state plans to introduce regulations that would allow it to require statewide adoption of a model, rather than leaving this up to local districts. An interesting feature of this plan is that, unlike the other applications, it's also quite specific with regard to what activities the state will spend its federal teacher-quality cash on. It explicitly says it wants to move Title II (teacher quality) dollars away from getting teachers to achieve "highly qualified" status and class-size reductions—the primary focus of the funding in most states—into helping teachers become more effective on new evaluation systems.

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## A Resource on School Choice, Teacher Certification, and More

Education Week

By: Sean Cavanagh

November 21, 2011

[http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/state\\_edwatch/2011/11/a\\_resource\\_on\\_school\\_choice\\_teacher\\_quality\\_and\\_more.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/state_edwatch/2011/11/a_resource_on_school_choice_teacher_quality_and_more.html)

The [Institute of Education Sciences](#), the main research arm of the U.S. Department of Education, has updated an online resource it manages on state policy, adding new information on "open-enrollment" policies for schools.

That resource is IES's straightforwardly-named "[Website on State Education Reforms](#)," which also offers state-by-state policy info on teacher quality, testing, data systems, school finance, and measures of academic progress. It's a simple, yet very useful, starting point for anybody interested in comparing ed policies across states.

For instance, if you want to see how one state's teacher-certification exams stack up against another's—in areas like testing basic skills, or subject-specific content—[it's here](#).

Curious about state graduation requirements, state exit exams, and the efforts states make to help students pass those exams? They're [housed at the site](#), too.

And if you're wondering about whether a state's public-school choice policies are relatively open, or restrictive, IES' database was recently updated to include more of [that information](#). Many states claim to have [46 states](#) open enrollment policies, but the limits those states place on whether districts have to accept students from outside their area vary greatly. (See my [recent story](#) on Michigan's debate over open enrollment, to get a sense of the volatility of the issue.)

The site draws primarily from data collected by organizations outside the federal government. State ed-policy wonks, enjoy.

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## Study Links Academic Setbacks to Middle School Transition

Education Week

By: Sarah D. Sparks

November 28, 2011

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/11/28/13structure.h31.html?tkn=LYQF8tx5RFdhYzruArJIRMiYie44LVY1tku&cmp=clp-edweek>

While policymakers and researchers alike have focused on improving students' transition into high school, a new study of Florida schools suggests the critical transition problem may happen years before, when students enter middle school. The [study](#), part of the Program on Education Policy and Governance Working Papers Series at Harvard University, found that students moving from grade 5 into middle school show a "sharp drop" in math and language arts achievement in the transition year that plagues them as far out as 10th grade, even risking thwarting their ability to graduate high school and go on to college. Students who make a school transition in 6th grade are absent more often than those who remain in one school through 8th grade, and they are more likely to drop out of school by 10th grade.

"I don't see eliminating the transition at the high school level as important or beneficial as eliminating the transition at the middle school level," said Martin R. West, an assistant education professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a co-author of the study.

"That to me is a really robust finding," said David L. Hough, the managing editor of the *Middle Grades Research Journal* and a dean emeritus of Missouri State University's college of education, in Springfield. "All these people are focusing on the transition to high school; it looks to me like they need to be focusing on that transition to middle school."

Mr. Hough, who was not involved in the Harvard study, has been developing a database of nearly 2,000 schools covering middle-level grades across 25 states. He said that roughly 6,000 schools nationwide are structured in the K-8 configuration and 8,000 as 6-8. While so-called "elemiddle" K-8 schools had been spreading more rapidly than regular middle schools in recent years, Mr. Hough said district moves to swap middle for elemiddle schools have "leveled off" since 2010.

For the Florida study, Mr. West and Guido Schwerdt, a researcher with the Ifo Institute for Economic Research at the University of Munich in Germany, used the state's longitudinal database to track more than 450,000 students in the state's public schools who proceeded from grades 3 to 10 between 2000-01 and 2008-09.

They found students who attended elementary schools ending at grade 5 had an early edge over those attending K-8 schools in mathematics and language arts, but their performance in both subjects dropped dramatically when they switched to middle school in 6th grade. After the 6th grade transition, middle school students fell by .12 standard deviations in math and .09 standard deviations in reading compared with students at K-8 schools, and then that gap continued to widen throughout middle school and into high school.

Moreover, students who had attended a middle school were 18 percent more likely than students who attended a K-8 school before high school to not enroll in grade 10 after attending grade 9—an indicator that they may have dropped out.

While the middle school drop was most pronounced in urban schools, Mr. West said the same general pattern was repeated in suburban and rural schools.

The Florida findings are "almost identical" to the results of a smaller, [2010 study](#) of New York City public schools, Mr. West

said. In it, Columbia University researchers found that students who started in K-5 or K-6 schools performed slightly better than their K-8 peers in math and language arts in 5th grade, but when they moved to a middle school, the K-8 and middle school students changed places, and the achievement gap between those groups increased through 8th grade.

### *Middle Versus High*

Mr. Hough has found there is “much popular experience about the shock students experience when first entering middle school from an elementary school, but precious little empirical data have been collected to examine it.”

Rather, he said, most researchers and policymakers focus on the transition into high school. In part, that may be because most students who drop out of high school do so in 9th or 10th grades, yet the Florida study found that the transition from middle to high school was much less traumatic for students than the one from elementary to middle school.

Florida students entering high school did see a drop in achievement, but it was temporary and only one-fifth the size of the drop seen during the middle school transition. “For the high school switchers, they suffer a little one-time drop but then recover,” Mr. West said. “It looks like a much less disruptive transition than the one to middle school; the high school transition is not that different from what you’d see in a typical school transition.”

The onset of puberty can exacerbate normal transition problems for younger students, according to Patti Kinney, an associate director of middle-level services at the National Association of Secondary School Principals, in Reston, Va. “You’re looking at students making a transition during a time when tremendous physical, cognitive, and emotional transitions are going on at the same time,” Ms. Kinney said. “There’s a wide variety of maturation among different children at that level.”

In contrast, the Mountain View, Calif., research group EdSource found no difference between K-8 and 6-8 school achievement overall in its 2010 study of middle-grade achievement in California, [“Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades.”](#) but it did find students often faced a tougher transition into middle school than high school, according to Matthew Rosen, an EdSource senior research associate.

“The picture we got was schools that were having higher-achievement outcomes were being more intense and intentional about looking at a wider array of student data [during the middle school transition] and finding out what interventions were needed quickly,” Mr. Rosen said.

### *Easing Transitions*

For example, the 1,400-student La Merced Intermediate School, part of the Montebello Unified School District outside Los Angeles, asks the elementary teachers of all incoming 6th graders to fill out academic-history reports, including their previous grades and test scores, problem areas, favorite subjects, and extracurricular activities. “Those sheets allow teachers to go, ‘OK, what is the range of our students’ interests and how do we get them involved in the activities that really resonate with their interests?’” Mr. Rosen said.

The teachers from the smaller elementary schools that feed into La Merced also accompany their 5th grade students on a site visit to the middle school, to help the students learn the campus layout and prepare for the differences in structure from one grade to the next.

For the Florida study, the researchers used a survey of principals to compare instructional practices at the various schools, but did not find much difference between practices or class sizes at K-8 and 6-8 schools. However, they did find that 6-8 middle schools had more than twice as many students at each grade level, 363, than the 125 students per grade on average at K-8 schools.

That larger grade-level group may make it harder to tailor instruction and ease the moves from grade to grade, Mr. West suggested.

Ms. Kinney of the NASSP said that effective transitions should be “a process, not an event.”

“A lot of times, people talk about transition programs, and they are talking about what they are doing in 9th grade, when they really need to be working with their middle schools to support students much earlier,” she said.

“Kids develop at their own rates; what’s important is how you are personalizing that environment for them,” Ms. Kinney said.

“The grade configuration in a lot of ways is a secondary consideration.”

The NASSP’s [Breaking Ranks in the Middle book](#) on improving student achievement in middle grades calls for schools serving those grades to provide each student with a “personal adult advocate” to help him or her understand the changing academic requirements and social dynamics.

“It is easy for those who don’t work regularly with middle-level students to forget that 6th graders are only five or six years removed from their teddy bears,” *Breaking Ranks* notes, and “those who do work with middle-level students sometimes forget that, by the time students leave ‘the middle,’ the rigors of college are only four short years away.”

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## **Textbooks Finally Take a Big Leap to Digital**

New York Times

By: Christopher F. Schuetze

November 23, 2011

[http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/24/world/americas/schoolwork-gets-swept-up-in-rush-to-go-digital.html?\\_r=1&ref=education](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/24/world/americas/schoolwork-gets-swept-up-in-rush-to-go-digital.html?_r=1&ref=education)

PARIS — Amazon, which got its start selling books online, announced this year that, for the first time, its digital books had outsold paper books. This trend of going digital does not hold true for all books: While many popular consumer books have successfully made the switch into the new format, [textbooks](#) are still widely read on paper.

Textbooks are gaining, though, as publishers take advantage of the popularity of tablets like the Kindle and [iPad](#), expanding their

catalogues and offering products like rental digital books that expire after a semester or two.

The potential for digital growth is leading publishers to experiment with products that stretch the boundaries of traditional textbooks, slowly turning away from static text and images toward a multimedia, intuitive approach, publishers say.

“Textbooks as e-books ought to be seen as a stepping stone to the future,” said Mark Majurey of Taylor & Francis, a textbook publisher in Britain.

Digital textbooks are any books that can be downloaded to an e-reader or computer or those that can be read online using a Web browser. While no one keeps precise numbers of digital textbook sales globally, a number of companies have seen similar growth patterns and nearly identical market share.

According to the Student Monitor, a private student market research company based in New Jersey, about 5 percent of all textbooks acquired in the autumn in the United States were digital textbooks. That is more than double the 2.1 percent of the spring semester.

Simba Information, a research company specializing in publishing, estimates that electronic textbooks will generate \$267.3 million this year in sales in the United States. That is a rise of 44.3 percent over last year. The American Association of Publishers estimates that the college textbooks industry generated a total of \$4.58 billion in sales last year.

Kathy Micky, a senior analyst at Simba, said digital textbooks were expected “to be the growth driver for the industry in the future.” Her company estimates that by 2013, digital textbooks will make up 11 percent of the textbook market revenue.

Though some textbook publishers made some of their textbooks available in digital formats a decade ago, it is only recently that the market has picked up. Responding to the new demand, many academic publishers have made almost everything they sell available in electronic format.

“All of our books are available as digital,” said Bruce Spatz, head of digital development at John Wiley & Sons, a major academic publisher.

Early textbook digitalization attempts were also focused more on specialized textbooks. But now publishers are looking at wider markets, focusing on broad subjects and students just now entering college.

“In general where the most money is made is in the introductory market,” said Ms. Mickey, noting that publishers were now focusing on supplying textbooks for first-year, introductory and core subjects — for courses taught to many students.

Other entities expanding into the market include Chegg, a major paper textbook rental company in the United States, which started offering digital, downloadable books this year. It announced in August that it planned to expand to become what it called one of the most comprehensive electronic textbook retailers in the United States.

CourseSmart, a partnership of five major U.S. textbook publishers that offers some 90 percent of textbooks used at North American universities online, announced its intention to expand overseas this year.

Perhaps the biggest change could come from the rise of electronic rentals. Digital textbooks can be made to expire — often between six and 18 months after the initial purchase — which means they cannot be resold like traditional books. Most digital textbooks also only license the first owner, and sophisticated software ensures that copies cannot be passed around. These measures help ensure that prices for digital textbooks stay well below the cost of the paper versions, publishers say, even though those who print traditional paper books might take issue with that.

“It might be a problem for the printers, but it isn’t a problem for the publishers,” said Bruce Hildebrand, who is in charge of the higher education sector at the Association of American Publishers.

Early this summer, Amazon announced that it was partnering with three major textbook companies to offer rentals of digital textbooks for even shorter terms.

When Amazon announced its program, which lets students rent a book even for 30 days, it said students could save 80 percent off the price of a new printed textbook. Amazon offers a service in which future rentals of the same textbooks will give students access to the electronic notes they stored on their device while reading the rental book.

Students say digital rentals can be good and bad.

“It was cheaper than actually buying the book,” said Rebecca Johnson, a senior at George Mason University, who bought her first electronic textbook during her junior year. She paid about 50 percent less for her digital textbook, which she bought directly from the publisher. But she pointed out that the digital version was not permanent.

“You have it for that class time, but you don’t have it forever,” Ms. Johnson said. Her textbook expired 180 days after she purchased it.

Jill Ambrose, the chief marketing officer at CourseSmart, says sections of rental books can often be printed off and kept. Also, most publishers will make the printed version of the textbook available at a big discount to students who have purchased the digital version.

For some students, the limited-time access can represent a real downside to digital books.

“I usually keep the book, it helps me with my other classes,” Ms. Johnson said. If she ever needs her microeconomics book again, she said, she will have to subscribe again to the online digital version.

Whether selling or renting, academic publishers are counting on the simple rise in tablet sales to propel the market. More than 40 million iPads have been sold worldwide, according to an Apple spokesman. Amazon does not release sales figures for its Kindle, but millions of units are thought to have been sold.

“The groundswell behind iPads in general could help drive the uptake the interest in electronic materials,” said Ms. Mickey of the Simba research company.

She cautioned that the release of the popular Kindle device in 2007 did not lift digital textbook sales much and that the enthusiasm for the iPad might not do too much to shift the trend entirely to digital textbooks.

Some experts question whether textbooks are ready to follow regular books onto tablets, readers, laptops and other devices.

“Electronic textbooks will eventually be the norm, but it’s going to be quite a bit more time than folks anticipate,” said Charlotte P. Lee, a professor at the University of Washington.

In May, Ms. Lee released the results of a study of graduate students showing that a majority eschewed portable devices after trying them for some months. Students complained that the traditional reading, scanning and note-taking habits — developed and honed by learning from paper textbooks — were not easily applied to tablets.

Ms. Lee explained that while the popularity of digital textbooks was sure to expand, learning from digital devices — especially standard consumer devices like the Kindle or the iPad — presented problems.

While traditional linear narratives, like those contained in a novel, can easily be transferred onto an electronic device, textbooks cannot as easily be transferred because they are rarely read from the first page to the last page. Ms. Lee said cognitive mapping of a textbook — knowing where certain information is contained, on the page or within the book — was needed to help students navigate such large amounts of text.

“We need to design devices that are specifically made to support academic reading,” she said.

Still, there are signs of growing popularity among students. In May, the National Association of College Stores found in a study of 655 students that 39 percent of students surveyed had used a dedicated digital reader, up from 19 percent just five months before. The association, which represents campus retailing industry in the United States and abroad, said such results showed that a “tipping point” for digital reader technology among college students was fast approaching.

The tipping point seems to be nearing for some traditional sellers. John Lindo, who manages a private student bookstore at Pennsylvania State University, estimated that the store was selling 10 percent fewer paper books this year because digital textbooks had become so popular.

Though his store has started offering digital versions for download, Mr. Lindo thinks the switch will hurt brick-and-mortar stores like his.

Digital textbooks are “the beginning of the end for the college bookstore, because they don’t need us,” said Mr. Lindo, speaking of the students.

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

*Correction: November 28, 2011*

*A previous version of this article misidentified the university where Charlotte P. Lee teaches.*

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## **STATE NEWS**

### **Dueling New Jersey rallies planned on taxpayer-funded scholarships for private schools**

Associated Press

By: Staff  
November 28, 2011

[http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2011/11/dueling\\_nj\\_rallies\\_planned\\_on.html](http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2011/11/dueling_nj_rallies_planned_on.html)

TRENTON — Dueling rallies are planned this week by foes and supporters of a New Jersey bill that would use taxpayer money to fund scholarships to send students to private schools.

The events come as education takes over one of the top spots on Gov. Chris Christie's agenda for the coming weeks.

The governor supports a law that would use 100 percent tax credits for corporations to pay for scholarships that students in some underperforming school districts could use to pay tuition at private schools or public schools in other communities.

Opponents, including the ACLU of New Jersey and The Latino Institute, will rally against the bill on Wednesday in Jersey City.

A day later, supporters of the proposal are planning to rally in Trenton.

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## Virtual schools are multiplying, but some question their educational value

Washington Post

By: Lyndsey Layton and Emma Brown

November 26, 2011

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/virtual-schools-are-multiplying-but-some-question-their-educational-value/2011/11/22/gIQUANUzkzN\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/virtual-schools-are-multiplying-but-some-question-their-educational-value/2011/11/22/gIQUANUzkzN_story.html)

A Virginia company leading a national movement to replace classrooms with computers — in which children as young as 5 can learn at home at taxpayer expense — is facing a backlash from critics who are questioning its funding, quality and oversight.

K12 Inc. of Herndon has become the country's largest provider of full-time public virtual schools, upending the traditional American notion that learning occurs in a schoolhouse where students share the experience. In K12's virtual schools, learning is largely solitary, with lessons delivered online to a child who progresses at her own pace.

Conceived as a way to teach a small segment of the [home-schooled](#) and others who need flexible schooling, virtual education has evolved into an alternative to traditional public schools for an increasingly wide range of students — high achievers, strugglers, dropouts, teenage parents and victims of [bullying](#) among them.

"For many kids, the local school doesn't work," said Ronald J. Packard, chief executive and founder of [K12](#). "And now, technology allows us to give that child a choice. It's about educational liberty."

Packard and other education entrepreneurs say they are harnessing technology to deliver quality education to any child, regardless of Zip code.

It's an appealing proposition, and one that has attracted support in state legislatures, including Virginia's. But in one of the most hard-fought quarters of public policy, a [rising chorus of critics](#) argues that full-time virtual learning doesn't effectively educate children.

"Kindergarten kids learning in front of a monitor — that's just wrong," said Maryelen Calderwood, an elected school committee member in Greenfield, Mass., who unsuccessfully tried to stop K12 from [contracting with her community to create New England's first virtual public school](#) last year. "It's absolutely astounding how people can accept this so easily."

People on both sides agree that the structure providing public education is not designed to handle virtual schools. How, for example, do you pay for a school that floats in cyberspace when education funding formulas are rooted in the geography of property taxes? How do you oversee the quality of a virtual education?

"There's a total mismatch," said Chester E. Finn Jr., president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a conservative think tank, who served on K12's board of directors until 2007. "We've got a 19th-century edifice trying to house a 21st-century system."

[Despite questions](#), full-time virtual schools are proliferating.

In the past two years, more than a dozen states have passed laws and removed obstacles to encourage virtual schools. And providers of virtual education have been making their case in statehouses around the country.

K12 has hired lobbyists from Boise to Boston and backed political candidates who support school choice in general and virtual education in particular. From 2004 to 2010, K12 gave about \$500,000 in direct contributions to state politicians across the country, with three-quarters going to Republicans, according to the National Institute on Money in State Politics.

"We understand the politics of education pretty well," Packard told investors recently.

K12's push into New England illustrates its skill. In 2009, the company began exploring the potential for opening a virtual school in Massachusetts in partnership with the rural Greenfield school district.

But Massachusetts education officials halted the plan, saying Greenfield had no legal authority to create a statewide school. So Greenfield and K12 turned to legislators, with the company spending about \$200,000 on Beacon Hill lobbyists.

State Rep. Martha “Marty” Walz, a Boston Democrat, wrote legislation that allowed Greenfield to open the [Massachusetts Virtual Academy](#) in 2010. She acknowledged that the language was imperfect and didn’t address issues of funding or oversight but said she couldn’t wait to craft a comprehensive plan.

“You do what you need to do sometimes to get the ball rolling,” said Walz, who accepted at least \$2,600 in campaign contributions from K12, its executives or its lobbyists since 2008, according to the National Institute on Money in State Politics.

That scenario is repeating nationwide as K12 and its allies seek to expand virtual education.

About 250,000 students are enrolled in full-time public virtual schools in 30 states, according to Susan Patrick of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, a trade association. Although that’s just a fraction of the country’s 50 million schoolchildren, the numbers are growing fast, Patrick said.

K12 teaches about two out of every five students in full-time online schools. Its next largest competitor is Baltimore-based Connections Education, which was recently acquired by Pearson, the mammoth British textbook publisher. The rest of the industry consists of smaller operators and some nonprofit virtual schools.

### *Seizing an opportunity*

If it were a school district, K12 would rank among the 30 largest of the nation’s 1,500 districts. The company, which began in two states a decade ago, now teaches about 95,000 students in virtual schools in 29 states and the District of Columbia.

And it plans to grow. “We are now that much closer to our manifest destiny of making a K12 Inc. education available to every child,” Packard said in a call with Wall Street analysts this month.

It’s a promising business. In the past fiscal year, K12 had revenue of \$522 million — a 36 percent increase from the prior year, according to securities filings. Its net income after a series of acquisitions was \$12.8 million. Packard earned \$2.6 million in total compensation.

Packard, 48, took a roundabout route to education. A former Goldman Sachs banker, he was working as a consultant with McKinsey and Co. when he got a call from Michael Milken, the financier who pleaded guilty to securities fraud in 1990 and later became a philanthropist partly focused on education.

Packard joined Milken’s education investment holding firm and ran one of his companies, a chain of preschools. About the same time, Packard was trying to find an online math course for his 6-year-old daughter. Frustrated by the dearth of options, he saw a business opportunity.

He founded K12 in 2000 with a \$10 million investment from Milken and Larry Ellison, the chief executive of Oracle Corp., maker of software and hardware systems. William J. Bennett, education secretary under President Ronald Reagan, became the company’s chairman, bringing his conservative bona fides and political connections to a company that originally aimed for the home-schooling market. Bennett resigned from K12 in 2005.

In the early years, Bror Saxberg served as the chief architect of K12’s curriculum. With a medical degree from Harvard and a doctorate in electrical engineering and computer science from MIT, he was excited by the potential to transform education by applying what cognitive scientists have learned about how brains work.

“There was a terrific opportunity to finally apply some of this learning science work at scale, to make learning environments that could really make a difference for students,” Saxberg said. He left the company to join Kaplan Inc. in 2009.

[Kaplan](#) is a for-profit education provider owned by The Washington Post Co. It competed directly with K12 until May, when K12 acquired Kaplan’s virtual-schools business. Kaplan continues to offer test-preparation courses, and in November the two companies announced an agreement to share distribution of some products and services.

K12 sells a variety of ways to learn online, ranging from hybrid schools — in which students meet in a classroom but take courses via computer — to a la carte courses purchased by traditional schools.

Last year, K12 formed a joint venture with Middlebury College to offer foreign language courses. This year, it bought a stake in a Chinese company that teaches English online.

But K12’s core business — and the one proving most controversial — is full-time virtual public schools.

### *No need for the bus stop*

For Tyler Hirata, going to school used to mean waking up at 6 a.m. and clambering aboard a yellow bus. Now he snoozes until midmorning and pads downstairs to the computer in his Dumfries home.

“This is fantastic!” said Tyler, 8, who had attended a [Prince William County](#) school but was enrolled this fall in the [Virginia Virtual Academy](#) — a public institution run by K12 and open to any student in the commonwealth.

Tyler said the best thing about taking third grade online is that it requires less than three hours a day. His mother is more

excited that, for the first time, Tyler is reading fluently on his own.

“The K12 program is phenomenal,” said Michele Hirata, adding that Tyler blossomed with her daily one-on-one attention. Virtual school has been equally positive for her fifth-grade daughter, Gennifer, 10, a fast learner who spends five hours a day practicing gymnastics, she said.

Virtual class sizes tend to be larger than at traditional schools — the Virginia academy averages 60 students per teacher, according to a school [document](#). So in the primary grades, the model relies on the intensive work of a parent “learning coach,” who provides most lessons away from the computer, using books and 90 pounds of other educational materials shipped to families by K12.

In the older grades, the bulk of learning is online, with software that sometimes aims to mimic real-life experiences for students, such as a high school biology lab featuring an animated frog dissection.

Teachers monitor student progress, grade work and answer questions by e-mail or phone. They work from home, aren’t likely to be unionized and earn as much as 35 percent less than their counterparts in regular schools, according to interviews with former K12 teachers.

Teachers also look for ways to help students socialize. Bethany Scanlon, a former special education teacher for K12’s Ohio Virtual Academy, shipped hot chocolate and popcorn to her students one winter holiday season. They all settled in with their computers to watch “A Charlie Brown Christmas” streamed over the Internet.

“When you’re teaching online, you have to be very creative,” she said.

In Dumfries, Tyler said he misses some of the best parts of school, such as lunchtime. And recess. And friends.

“Believe me,” he said, “if you are home-schooled, you will want friends.”

During recent deliberations over virtual schooling in Virginia, a member of the state Board of Education raised the issue of socialization.

“This would appear to make it possible to go from kindergarten through eighth grade without ever stepping into a real classroom,” David M. Foster said. “I’m not sure I want to encourage that. . . . Collaborative problem solving, socialization, working with other people is key not just to the global economy but to getting along in life.”

### *Mixed performance*

While virtual schools continue to expand, their effectiveness is unclear.

“We have no real evidence one way or another,” said Tom Loveless, a Brookings Institution scholar who served as a paid consultant to K12 in its early years.

A [2009 analysis](#) by the U.S. Education Department found that there wasn’t enough research to draw conclusions about how elementary and secondary students fare in full-time virtual schools compared with classrooms.

On measures widely used to judge all public schools, such as state test scores and graduation rates, virtual schools — often run as charter schools — tend to perform worse than their brick-and-mortar counterparts.

At the Colorado Virtual Academy, which is managed by K12 and has more than 5,000 students, the on-time graduation rate was 12 percent in 2010, compared with 72 percent statewide.

That same year, K12’s Ohio Virtual Academy — whose enrollment tops 9,000 — had a 30 percent on-time graduation rate, compared with a state average of 78 percent.

Last year, about one-third of K12-managed schools met the achievement goals required under [the federal No Child Left Behind law](#), according to Gary Miron, a Western Michigan University professor who called that performance “poor.”

K12 officials say the weak test results are related to the program often attracting students who struggled in regular schools.

One of K12’s oldest and biggest schools is the Agora Cyber Charter, a statewide virtual school that began in Pennsylvania in 2005. The company manages the school under a contract with its nonprofit board of trustees. Enrollment this fall topped 8,000 students.

Agora has never met federally defined achievement goals.

The school markets itself as an option for at-risk students who are failing at their neighborhood school. Last year, about two-thirds of its students were low-income.

Many lived in unstable homes, said Aimee Saunders, who taught history at K12’s Pennsylvania schools for four years until 2009.

Some of those children didn't have an adult who could serve as the learning coach. Instead, they were left home alone and did little or no schoolwork, she said.

"You take students who normally would struggle because of their home environment and then you put them in their home to learn," Saunders said. "It doesn't work that well."

Rapid student turnover can compound the problem. Of the 8,700 students who enrolled in 2010-11, more than a quarter withdrew during the year, according to school records.

"New students were always coming in," Saunders said, which "made it difficult to be able to focus on the students I already had."

Company officials said internal data show that Agora students — and K12 students in general — are learning at a faster rate than the national norm, even if they can't pass a grade-level test. And the longer students stay with K12, the better they perform, the company said.

But Pennsylvania has its own measure of how fast students are learning, and it showed "significant evidence" that Agora did not meet growth standards last year.

In June 2010, the state threatened to revoke Agora's charter unless the school made changes, including aligning the curriculum with state standards and expanding remediation programs for struggling students. It also insisted on more transparency so it would be clear how much K12 was receiving for different services.

Agora officials said they addressed those concerns by opening a face-to-face tutoring center in Philadelphia, for example, and hiring staff to conduct home visits.

Saunders, the former Agora teacher, says virtual schools provide an important new option for families and should be forgiven for missteps.

After all, many traditional public schools have failed to help the neediest children.

"A lot of schools are making mistakes by not trying anything different than they've tried before," she said.

#### *Cost to taxpayers*

Even some supporters of virtual schools question whether online operators are charging taxpayers fairly.

"They have no business trying to charge as much as the brick-and-mortar schools, at least over time," said Finn, of the Fordham Institute, which has commissioned a study of the cost of online schools. "Once you've got the stuff that you're going to use for fourth-grade math, for instance, you don't really need to do much with it. And it should be cheaper."

Online education companies say they are no different from textbook publishers and other businesses that profit from sales to schools.

But payments for a year's worth of online schooling can vary wildly. For instance, K12 received \$3,728 per full-time student in 2009-10 for its virtual school based in Broward County, Fla., but \$5,000 per student in Greenfield, Mass. K12 is getting \$6,200 for each student in its D.C. school, which enrolls about 100 students.

In Pennsylvania, because of a complicated funding mechanism, K12's Agora Cyber Charter receives \$6,000 to \$16,000 per student for an identical course load, depending on where that student lives.

"We don't have a real handle on what the real cost is for a virtual school," said Mitchell D. Chester, commissioner of elementary and secondary education in Massachusetts.

Jeff Kwitowski, K12's vice president for public relations, said it's "impossible" to pinpoint the true cost of educating a child in any environment, whether virtual or face-to-face. Prices vary because some schools purchase different K12 services, he said.

#### *Targeting rural counties*

The Virginia Virtual Academy, another K12 venture, began enrolling full-time students across the commonwealth in fall 2009, more than a year before state law addressed this new kind of education.

The Virginia school offers a lesson in how K12 relied on political savvy and statehouse connections to build its business.

The Virginia venture was a partnership between the traditional schools of Carroll County — a rural county bordering North Carolina — and K12. Children who enrolled in the Virtual Virginia Academy were counted as Carroll County students no matter where they lived.

That was no accident.

State aid varies by school district and follows a formula based on poverty, among other factors. Affluent [Fairfax County](#) receives

\$2,716 per pupil from Richmond, whereas relatively poor Carroll County receives \$5,421, according to the state Education Department.

This year, 66 Fairfax students are enrolled in the virtual school. Richmond is paying the virtual school twice as much for those students as it would if they attended neighborhood schools in their own county.

"Clearly, it's not a logical or equitable system," said state [Sen. George L. Barker](#) (D-Fairfax). "It's a horrible deal for taxpayers."

Barker has twice tried to change funding so that subsidies are based on where students live. Twice he was rebuffed by Gov. Robert F. McDonnell (R), a champion of school choice who successfully promoted legislation to authorize full-time virtual schools in 2010.

K12 was the only private company present during talks to craft that legislation. McDonnell has received \$55,000 in campaign contributions from K12 or its executives since 2009, including a \$15,000 payment to his political action committee this month.

McDonnell was on a trade-related trip to India late last week and unavailable to comment. But his spokesman, Jeff Caldwell, said K12's political support had not influenced decisions regarding virtual schools.

"They're a corporation that is making donations to several folks," Caldwell said. "The fact that they gave some to the governor certainly did not sway his opinion."

The governor recognizes that the state needs a better way to fund virtual schools but does not want to make abrupt changes that would harm the new schools, his staff said.

McDonnell "came into office really wanting to provide options and innovation to Virginia schoolchildren," state Education Secretary Laura Fornash said. "Virtual schools [were] a major part of that."

This year, K12 opened a second virtual school in Virginia, signing a contract with Buena Vista City, near Lynchburg, where the per-pupil state subsidy is \$5,850. The two schools combined have an enrollment of 540 students.

While K12 executives see unlimited horizons for online education, traditional schools are struggling with severe budget cuts.

In Carroll County, the Virginia Virtual Academy provides a revenue stream for the public school system, which collects a \$500 registration fee for each out-of-district student. On top of that, the county collects a management fee — 6.5 percent of the taxpayer dollars that flow to K12.

In what may be an unintended irony, Carroll County is using that windfall — \$178,450 last year — to buy old-fashioned but much-needed textbooks for its brick-and-mortar schools.

Staff researcher Lucy Shackelford contributed to this report.

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## Georgia to roll out teacher evaluations in schools

Associated Press

By: Dorie Turner

November 27, 2011

<http://www.ledger-enquirer.com/2011/11/27/1835995/ga-to-roll-out-teacher-evaluations.html>

ATLANTA — For the first time ever, student test scores will soon factor into evaluations for teachers and principals across Georgia under a new statewide program.

The state will roll out a pilot of its new educator evaluation system in January, starting with the 26 school districts that signed on to Georgia's application for the federal "Race to the Top" grant competition. The state won \$400 million last year to launch a host of programs aimed at improving student achievement and turning around low-performing schools.

The new evaluation system includes a value-added score - which gauges educators' value based on how much their students gained in one year. Though there's not one uniform way to calculate value-added measurements, the basic concept is to show whether a teacher helped a student improve through test scores, attendance and other factors.

Teachers also will be judged on student surveys and two classroom observations by school administrators, with ratings of exemplary, proficient, developing/needs improvement or ineffective.

"Sometimes, you just need to call a spade a spade," said Martha Ann Todd, director of teacher and leader effectiveness for the Georgia Department of Education. "It's just a real clear message that this is not good enough."

Principals will be judged based on their ability to retain effective teachers, their school's student attendance and surveys filled out by the teachers in their schoolhouse, among other measurements.

For teachers in subjects where there is no standardized test - like chorus or chemistry - districts will have to come up with student learning targets for classes to meet rather than relying on test scores. About 75 percent of teachers are in non-tested subjects.

And eventually, the state plans to link the evaluations to merit bonuses for teachers and principals who do well.

Teacher evaluations are not new to Georgia - districts across the state have evaluated teachers and principals for years. But this

is the first time the state has mandated that student test scores be part of that process, and it's the first statewide system that eventually will be rolled out to all 180 districts.

Value-added measurements like the one Georgia plans to use have drawn attention nationally - and some criticism - after The Los Angeles Times printed the names and scores for every teacher in the Los Angeles school district in April. Critics say it's difficult to track which teacher is responsible for a student's academic progress because many students get tutoring or extra help from a variety of teachers.

And experts on value-added measurements say states must be careful not to make their calculations too simple because it could create inaccurate results. For example, a school can't just take a student's test score and subtract it from the previous year's score to calculate how the teacher influenced them, said Bill Sanders, a retired University of Tennessee professor who helped develop a value-added measure for the North Carolina-based SAS Institute.

Instead, calculations must take into account how much a student was absent, whether the student transferred into the school mid-year or whether the class got a new teacher after Christmas break, he said.

"What people think is that every principal or teacher ought to be able to take a \$2 calculator and scratch pad and go to the dining room table and calculate their own value-added measure. What you'll get back is completely unreliable," Sanders said. "I fear a backlash when that happens where all value-added processes get painted with the same brush."

Teachers say they hope the state doesn't rush through rolling out the evaluation system.

"To do evaluations well will require significant agreement on the instrument, significant training of those who will use it and significant amounts of time to actually accomplish it," said Tim Callahan, spokesman for the Professional Association of Georgia Educators, which represents more than 80,000 educators across the state. "Replacing our current drive-by evaluation system won't be done easily, quickly or cheaply."

The state's pilot will include about 5,000 teachers and several hundred principals in the 26 districts - with up to 60 districts being added each year starting in fall 2012. The entire state will be under the evaluation system starting in fall 2014.

Georgia is not alone in its use of test scores to evaluate educators: 23 states use student achievement to judge teachers, according to a recent report from the National Council on Teacher Quality. That number has grown in the past couple of years as states passed new teacher evaluation laws to help them win part of the \$4 billion set aside by the U.S. Department of Education for Race to the Top.

Even states that didn't win the money - like Colorado and Washington - have moved forward with developing teacher evaluations. And states hoping to get waivers from the Bush-era No Child Left Behind law must come up with teacher and principal evaluation systems.

"What the adults in school buildings are doing is more important relative to student academic progress than the mailing address of where the students come from," Sanders said. "To ignore this basically says that we as a society are prepared to allow a lot of students to come nowhere close to fulfilling their full academic potential. This is why as a society we can no longer essentially ignore the fact that what happens in schools makes a huge difference."

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## Californians support making teachers' reviews public

By: Howard Blume

Los Angeles Times

November 20, 2011

<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-poll-teachers-20111121.0.4971525.story>

*A majority of California voters want teacher evaluations made public and want student test scores factored into the reviews, the USC Dornsife/L.A. Times poll finds.*

California voters want teachers' performance evaluations made public, a new poll has found. And most also want student test scores factored into an instructor's review.

Of those surveyed, 58% said the quality of public schools would be improved if the public had access to teachers' reviews; 23% said it would not help or could make things worse.

"They want to see the evaluations," said Linda DiVall, the chief executive of American Viewpoint, a Republican firm that co-directed the bipartisan [poll](#) for the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences and the Los Angeles Times. "Just like with corporate America, there is the same desire here for transparency and accountability."

About six in 10 voters said test scores should count for at least 30% of a teacher's evaluation. But voters also said they want a range of measures used, including parent feedback and classroom observation, to determine an instructor's effectiveness.

Across the country, an increasing number of school districts have begun using student test scores as an element in evaluating teachers — a move encouraged by the Obama administration. Thirteen states now make student achievement growth — typically measured by test scores — the most important component of teacher reviews, up from four states two years ago, according to the Washington, D.C.-based National Council on Teacher Quality.

In Los Angeles, the issue is a sticking point in contract negotiations. L.A. Unified School District Supt. John Deasy wants test scores included in a teacher's evaluation, but he opposes making the reviews public.

The teachers union has resisted any use of test scores to rate teachers. The union and some experts say that California's

standardized tests provide a limited gauge of student learning and unreliable feedback on teacher effectiveness.

"It looks like the poll results, taken as a whole, are very supportive of Deasy's agenda" and that of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, said Dominic J. Brewer, associate dean of research and faculty affairs at USC's Rossier School of Education.

"There's clearly no teacher-bashing sentiment, just a desire for some changes," he said.

The public's desire for measuring teacher performance is understandable, said Joshua Pechthalt, president of the California Federation of Teachers.

"Quantifiable productivity is often the standard for evaluating performance in the private sector, but that model doesn't translate to public education," he said. "Teacher unions need to do a better job of communicating that."

If teacher assessments are fair and reliable, then those personnel records should no longer be confidential, said poll participant Kellisa Myers, 23, of Lakewood. Myers added, however, that she would not want evaluations to be based on student test results.

Myers' perspective exemplified the mixed feelings voters expressed about standardized tests. About 7 in 10 like the idea of relying less on test scores. And nearly two-thirds agreed that mandatory testing "can limit what students learn and does not account for social and economic differences or for the different ways in which students learn." A greater number of voters said that standardized testing had hurt rather than helped public education in California.

Latino voters had more faith in the tests: Half of them were willing to let the exams count for most of a teacher's rating. That's substantially more weight than many experts would give the tests; some oppose using them entirely.

Testing, said parent Anne Simoneau of Long Beach, is overused, "a huge expense," and promulgated by "a private industry that is using our fears to manipulate us, to scare us into utilizing their products."

At the same time, she said, some testing is needed to provide a standard for measuring progress. "And I do think it should be easier to get rid of ineffectual people," she said.

She recalled how her daughter slowed down academically under an ineffective teacher and soared under excellent ones. Even for her daughter, who has strong support at home and other advantages, the quality of the teaching mattered, said Simoneau, a urologist.

The survey found voters overwhelmingly reluctant to use only student exam results to determine teachers' pay: 10% would want teacher compensation set by such data.

There also was little support for basing teacher pay on experience or training. Currently, most teachers are paid based on a combination of experience and training.

"I don't think that simply having taken classes is worth a whole lot unless it helps with teaching," said participant Katherine Sapiro, 58, a college professor who lives in Whittier. "Standardized tests, I think, are worth even less."

On standardized tests and some other issues, voters' views frequently aligned with positions advanced by teachers unions. Most voters would pay teachers more, improve their training and move more money from administration to the classroom.

But Californians also have reservations about teacher unions, the poll found. By a 62%-to-30% margin, for example, people agreed with the statement that teacher unions "have too much influence over public education policy and stand in the way of improving schools."

"Teachers might be the most popular people on the planet Earth, but you group them into a union and voters become much more ambivalent," said Dan Schnur, director of the Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics at USC.

Still, curbing the influence of teachers unions isn't nearly as important as other factors voters thought would improve schools, said Stanley B. Greenberg, chief executive of Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, a Democratic firm that co-directed the poll. Voters overwhelmingly favored increasing parental involvement (95%), reducing class sizes (87%), and delivering more funds to campuses that serve struggling students (76%).

The survey of 1,500 voters was conducted from Oct. 30 through Nov. 9. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 2.52 percentage points.

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