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Feds Attempt Student Data Grab

The U.S. Congress has data collection on the agenda. Bills have passed or are under consideration in both houses. Some are alarmed by increased federal data collection and plans to share information among agencies. Anxiety about student data collection and sharing are heightened by hacks, leaks, and fraudulent schemes that have resulted in the release of private information to unauthorized people. Many maintain that even so-called “authorized” entities have no business collecting or sharing the kind of private information current legislation seeks to access.

The federal government believes it is a good idea to increase data collection. Misguided bills include the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act or FEPA (H.R. 4174), which was passed by the House of Representatives on November 15, 2017. An identical bill is on tap in the Senate, S. 2046. The chief sponsor of the House bill is Rep. Paul Ryan, Speaker of the House, a Wisconsin Republican. The Senate bill is sponsored by Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA).

There are many problematic issues surrounding the proposed increase in federal data collection and intra-agency sharing. They include:

1. The federal government shouldn't have dossiers on citizens.
2. It is doubtful that the federal government can adequately protect the information and keep it safe and private.

3. States and school districts collecting the data for transfer to the Feds have a poor record of adequately protecting information.

4. There is no evidence that the collection of such data does anyone any good.

The Parent Coalition for Student Privacy opposes such legislation. Their



2016 letter to the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking made clear they are against “any proposal that would lead to the creation of a central federal clearinghouse or linked data sets containing the personally identifiable information of all students, commonly referred to as a federal student unit-record system or national database.”

Teresa Mull points out that there is no evidence that data collection improves student performance, program development, or has any other benefits. Mull is a research fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute. She points out:

This legislation is an overreach of

government, an invasion of privacy, and pointless. Government has spent billions on programs without knowing their effect before they had this data, and now we're supposed to believe that armed with access to ‘maximum data availability’ the bureaucrats will suddenly start using our money sensibly? (DailyCaller.com, 11-29-17)

And sensible use isn't the only problem. *Education Week* reports, “A wide range of cybersecurity threats are sweeping through the education sector, sowing discord and costing public schools significant time, money, and trust.” The article continues:

Criminal hacking groups have terrorized and extorted school communities. Email scams have led to identify theft, fraudulent tax returns, and stolen public funds. Mistakes by district staff, third-party vendors, and other outside groups have left teacher and student information vulnerable.

An *Education Week* survey of school technology workers found that only “15% say they have implemented a cybersecurity plan in their own district.” Keith Krueger, CEO of a professional association of K-12 technology leaders, says, “The challenges are becoming more sophisticated, and everyone is at greater risk.” *Education Week* says,

“While the K-12 sector has spent heavily on digital devices, software, and bandwidth, investments in cybersecurity have not kept pace. That's left many district IT departments understaffed and under-

resourced — just as they're being asked to fend off the types of attacks that have overcome such corporate titans as Equifax, Target, and Yahoo.” (11-28-17)

Jane Robbins, an attorney and a senior fellow at the American Principles Project, points out that the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act works on “the contrary principle,” meaning that instead of citizens giving consent before their data are distributed among federal agencies, personal information would be “re-purposed” without their knowledge or permission “to achieve a goal the government thinks is worthwhile.”

Robbins offers the example of FAFSA, the federal student aid form that more than 20 million high school seniors submit online annually. There are more than 100 points of information submitted by students, about themselves and their families. All that information could be available for sharing among federal agencies and to outside agencies who wished to engage in “research.”

Robbins also points out that “a huge FAFSA data breach [was] discovered in early 2017, exposing over 100,000 citizens to fraud based on their stolen records.” (TruthInAmericanEducation.com, 11-28-17)

Yet, Congress is moving full-speed ahead to spend more taxpayer dollars, forcing states and local districts to also spend taxpayer dollars on computers and personnel to collect and submit data — all for a grand, untested, and potentially dangerous experiment that puts vulnerable children and young people at risk. This has a familiar ring to it. It sounds a lot like Common Core.

Paying Teachers Not to Teach

New York City has over 800 teachers who are fully paid and tenured but never go to classrooms or teach students. In August, the New York City Department of Education announced that about 400 of them would be assigned to schools. This pool of teachers who don't teach are referred to as the “Absent Teachers Reserve” (ATR). Daniel Weisberg, who worked at the city's department of education during former Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration says, “We've got this group of teachers who either can't find a job or won't find a job.”

Two education advocacy groups would like to know more about the plan to send half of the ATR teachers back to classrooms. Educators for Excellence and The Education Trust-New York filed a Freedom of Information request seeking specific details. These organizations would like to know, among other things: the total number of ATR teachers who were assigned to schools by October 15; the reason those teachers were originally removed from their classroom assignments; the “effectiveness rating” of teachers from the pool who have now been returned to classrooms; and data about which grades or subjects these teachers

are now assigned to teach.

After last year's cost to pay them reached \$150 million in salaries and benefits, the New York City Department of Education (DOE) decided to do something about the hundreds of teachers, some of whom have not worked for a dozen years but have been paid. This pool of paid-but-not-teaching teachers ballooned in 2005 when principals were given more control over who worked at their schools, ending some union seniority hiring procedures. But the United Federation of Teachers' collective-bargaining contracts still require that no tenured teacher is actually fired.

The New York City DOE decision in August was meant to partially overrule the teachers union, school principals, and teachers in the Absent Teachers Reserve. Jobs would be filled and the union, teachers, and principals would be forced to cooperate, at least to an extent.

The Freedom of Information request has so far achieved no response. But some information is already known.



Of the teachers in the ATR at the end of the previous school year, 25% had remained in the pool for five years or longer. The average salary of these teachers is \$94,000 — ten thousand dollars more than a starting teacher's salary in New York City.

Some of the ATR teachers ended up there after losing jobs when a school where they taught was closed, due either to declining enrollment or poor performance. Some ATR teachers quickly get new jobs. Others do not.

According to the *New York Times*, “Close to a third of the teachers in the pool were there because they had faced legal or disciplinary charges.” Of those placed

in the ATR after the 2015-16 school year, “12% had received the lowest possible ratings of effectiveness,” compared to 1% of all New York City schoolteachers who scored that low.

The union at the center of the ATR pool is the United Federation of Teachers, the largest member of the New York State United Teachers union. They are affiliated with the National Educational Association, the largest teachers union in the U.S. The past president of the United Federation of Teachers is Randi Weingarten, who is now president of the American Federation of Teachers, the second largest national teachers union. (*New York Times*, 8-18-17) (The74Million.org, 11-28-17)

Homeschooler, Rescuer, Artist, & Entrepreneur

Being educated at home was the way families trained children before the U.S. adopted the public school system. While most families choose public or private schools, best estimates indicate that more than two million American children are currently being educated at home.

While many families still choose traditional one-family homeschooling, there are

many other options. Homeschoolers are a thriving community where outside-the-home opportunities for students abound.

One young man in Texas began his education at home with his mother, later found artists to mentor him, and is today an asset to his community and a budding entrepreneur.

(See *Homeschooler*, page 2)

EDUCATION BRIEFS

The Justice Department is scrutinizing alleged discrimination against Asian-American applicants by Harvard University. Using its subjective “holistic” admissions process, the school allegedly denies admission to eligible Asian U.S. citizens with “near-perfect test scores, top-one-percent grade point averages, academic awards, and leadership positions.” It appears Harvard limits the admission of highly qualified applicants based only on their ancestral origins. As a group, Asian-Americans often excel academically. The Obama administration dismissed a discrimination lawsuit filed in Boston in 2014 by a group of Asian-American students. Harvard has been directed to provide pertinent documentation to the Trump Justice Department by December. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin in any program or activity receiving Federal funds. With few exceptions, American universities receive federal funds. (*Wall Street Journal*, 11-21-17)

A graduate student who works as a teaching assistant in the University of Pennsylvania history department tweeted that she openly discriminates against white people; she received some backlash from the public but was not reprimanded by the school. Stephanie McKellop, who identifies as a “queer disabled feminist,” posted on social media: “I will always call on my Black women students first. Other POC [people of color] get second tier priority. WW [white women] come next. And, if I have to, white men.” A New York sociology professor defended her procedure and described it as “progressive stacking,” something commonly done in academia as a way to counter societal norms. The concept holds that society places more “value [on] men’s voices,” and values white men’s voices the most. *Reason* magazine says, “It seems more like a way of practicing discrimination.” *Reason* suggests that in deference to upholding the right to free speech the university should not fire McKellop, but says that “Penn has every right to make sure its instructors are not engaged in overt racial discrimination with respect to how they treat their students.” (*Reason*, 10-21-17)

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Adventure Playgrounds

While America removes swing sets from playgrounds because they are considered too risky, some believe a little risk is okay for growing children. Playgrounds that encourage free play in an environment with some hazards are common in Britain and other parts of Europe. They are slowly gaining ground here. There are almost 30 such playgrounds in the U.S., from Washington to California, New Hampshire to Florida, and Illinois to Colorado. Some are pop-ups, available for a limited time in changing locations. A few are permanent.

A 2015 documentary film titled “The Land” shows children at a Welsh “adventure playground” as they climb trees, swing in huge elbow-shaped plumbing pipes, cut cardboard with real saws, work with hammers and nails, and even light small bonfires. Their experiences are about as far from those in a typical American playground as imaginable.

Children at The Land in Wales are supervised by “playworkers,” adults who help set up equipment but don’t interfere with the children’s play unless an activity is clearly unsafe. There haven’t been injuries beyond scrapes and bruises.

The Alliance for Childhood encourages stimulating play for children and the creation of Adventure Playgrounds. In a book the organization published in 2010, the author says, “Think of an ad-

venture playground as an urban countryside, where children can experience all sorts of play that they might have only with great difficulty in the city.” She also says, “It is a space that allows for all the different types of play to be discovered by children. It is a place of psychological safety and calculated risk.”

Adventure Play has been a permanent feature of The Parish School in Houston, Texas since 2008. It is an after-school program available for a fee two or four days a week. Children ages 6-12 work and play together in an environment of



old tires, child-constructed forts, ropes for swinging, broken appliances they can take apart if they wish, and much more. The ParishSchool.org website says the children are “in charge of their own time.” They have the “opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them.” Children “can work from their strengths, but are more motivated to tackle their challenges. Play is very motivating, even when certain aspects of it are difficult.”

While an adventure playground might not be the first choice for some parents, others will favor a place that allows children to develop resilience, experience group cooperation, and have fun outdoors in an environment that fosters independence.

Homeschooler (Continued from page 1)

When Hurricane Harvey hit Houston this summer with 40 inches of rain in four days, 16-year-old Isaiah Wakeham ventured out to rescue stranded people by boat and ferry them to safety. His mother says that once the rain stopped and people were safe, her son “spent the next week pulling soaked sheetrock, cutting out carpet, and loading the debris of people’s homes into his truck to haul to dumpsters.”

Isaiah says of the storm, “I don’t know a single person in Houston who wasn’t affected.” Wanting to do even more to help victims, he decided he could use his artwork to raise needed funds.

When a very young Isaiah showed interest in drawing and other artistic pursuits, his mother — his only teacher through middle school — didn’t feel qualified to teach art. Isaiah began attending a homeschool cooperative that included instruction by a local artist. His flexible schedule allowed him to also spend time with a family friend who illustrates children’s books. Isaiah gained even more experience with an artist who worked at a church his family had attended.

Isaiah created what he called “Texas Doodle,” a map of Texas filled with pen and ink designs including birds, flowers, and other items significant to the state. His father helped him set up a website to sell Isaiah’s artwork.

After the flood, the young man arranged for profits from the Texas Doodle shirts he sells online to be donated to flood victims. The church Isaiah and his family attend, Bayou City Fellowship, set up an independent fund to distribute proceeds.

For the past two years, Isaiah has been a part-time student at the Saint Constantine School in Houston, which is affiliated with the Orthodox Christian Church and is accredited as an instructional site of The King’s College in New York City. One of the classes he takes at the private school is art. Isaiah says, “The biggest thing is setting your goals and standards and focusing on those every day. Don’t think of it as some future thing — it’s something you can make happen today.”

Homeschooling is a thriving, evolving, creative, and fulfilling endeavor. It can look like whatever a family chooses. There are online courses, part-time school options, and cooperatives where students learn foreign languages, biology, or any subject their family decides to outsource.

Isaiah Wakeham’s family is familiar with the evolution of homeschooling. His mother’s parents were one of the families in the 1980s precedent-setting Texas lawsuit that defended a family’s right to homeschool. (SaintConstantine.org, 9-18-17) (blog.HSL-DA.org, 11-20-17)

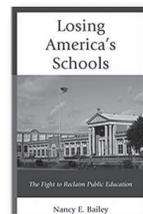
MALLARD FILLMORE / by Bruce Tinsley



Book of the Month



Losing America's Schools: The Fight to Reclaim Public Education, Nancy E. Bailey, Rowman and Littlefield, 2016, \$25.00



There was a time when an American eighth-grade education produced a fairly well-prepared citizen. It is ironic that the more experts stick their hands in the school-reform pie, the more poorly educated students become.

What happened is that certain entities became aware of the huge pot of money represented by public schools and they devised ways to get a piece of it for themselves. There are also ideological goals motivating some businesses, organizations, and individuals to undertake or encourage “reforms.”

In her book, Dr. Bailey examines a variety of school-reform schemes. The biggest, most expensive boondoggle in recent history is Common Core. Bailey highlights teachers unions’ support for Common Core, which was opposed by many teachers, including some union members. At the 2010 American Federation of Teachers convention in Seattle, union president Randi Weingarten welcomed Bill Gates as a speaker but many teachers booed the largest private funder of Common Core. Then-president of the National Education Association Dennis Van Roekel was also a Common Core proponent and the current NEA president has done nothing substantive to stop it.

Bailey examines Teach for America (TFA), a program that trains recent college graduates with no teaching experience for only five weeks before putting them in charge of K-12 classrooms. She suggests that the only way TFA could become legitimate is to restructure it as “Teacher Assistants for America.” Bailey points out that TFA often doesn’t fill jobs that would go unfilled, and offers examples of experienced teachers being supplanted by TFA newbies, as occurred in Dallas, Texas, when 350 teachers were laid off and 100 TFA recruits were hired.

Bailey suggests that high school guidance counselors be armed with up-to-date career forecasts. They should help match students to schools that are best suited to them, not just the most prestigious or expensive ones.

According to Bailey, the decision to pursue career training instead of a college degree should be made by students only after they have enough academic experience to determine that this is the right direction for them,

Losing America's Schools looks at charter schools, International Baccalaureate programs, school vouchers, teacher training programs, and more.

There can certainly be disagreement about which reforms could have positive results and which are best avoided. Bailey’s book examines these in an easily accessible format.

FOCUS: Bill Gates Tacitly Admits His Common Core Experiment Was A Failure

by Joy Pullmann

Originally appeared at *TheFederalist.com* on October 25, 2017. Reprinted with permission.

It looks like this is as close to an apology or admission of failure as we're going to get, folks. Sorry about that \$4 trillion and mangled years of education for American K-12 kids and teachers.

Bill and Melinda Gates run the world's richest nonprofit, with assets at \$40 billion and annual giving around \$4 billion. They have helped pioneer a megagiving strategy called "advocacy philanthropy," which aims to use private donations to shift how governments structure their activities and use taxpayer dollars.

Since 2009, the Gates Foundation's primary U.S. activity has focused on establishing and implementing Common Core, a set of centrally mandated curriculum rules and tests for what children are to learn in each K-12 grade, with the results linked to school and teacher ratings and punitive measures for low performers. The Gates Foundation has spent more than \$400 million itself and influenced \$4 trillion in U.S. taxpayer funds towards this goal. Eight years later, however, Bill Gates is admitting failure on that project, and a "pivot" to another that is not likely to go any better.

"Based on everything we have learned in the past 17 years, we are evolving our education strategy," Gates wrote

on his blog as a preface to a speech he gave in Cleveland in October. He followed by detailing how U.S. education has essentially made little improvement in the years since he and his foundation — working so closely with the Obama administration that federal officials regularly consulted foundation employees and waived ethics laws to hire several — began redirecting trillions of public dollars towards programs he now admits haven't accomplished much.

"If there is one thing I have learned," Gates says in concluding his speech, "it is that no matter how enthusiastic we might be about one approach or another, the decision to go from pilot

to wide-scale usage is ultimately and always something that has to be decided by you and others the field." If this statement encompasses his Common Core debacle, Gates could have at least the humility to recall that Common Core had no pilot before he took it national. There wasn't even a draft available to the public before the Obama administration hooked states into contracts, many of which were ghostwritten with Gates funds, pledging they'd buy that pig in a poke.

But it looks like this is as close to an apology or admission of failure as we're going to get, folks. Sorry about that \$4

trillion and mangled years of education for American K-12 kids and teachers. Failing with your kids and money for eight years is slowly getting billionaire visionaries to "evolve" and pledge to respect the *hoi polloi* a little more, though, so be grateful.

Strategic Retreat, or Stealthy Persistence?

While Gates will continue to dump money into curricula and teacher training based on Common Core, "we will no

longer invest directly in new initiatives based on teacher evaluations and ratings," he said. This is the portion of the Common Core initiative around which bipartisan grassroots

opposition coalesced, since unions oppose accountability for teachers and parents oppose terrible ideas thrust upon their kids without their input. Gates' speech reinforces that Common Core supporters are scapegoating their initiative's poor quality and transgression against the American right to self-government upon its links to using poorly constructed, experimental tests to rate teachers and schools.

Agreed, that's a bad idea that failed miserably, both in public relations and in teacher effectiveness terms, but it's one bad bite out of a rotten apple. Looks like Gates is just going to bite again from an-

other angle. It's the old rationalization for communism: "Great idea, terrible implementation." Yes, that sometimes happens, but what about considering whether the implementation trainwreck was caused by a bad idea?

In lieu of ramming his preferred, untested education theories through a mindhive of unelected bureaucrats elated to be showered with Gates money and attention, over the next five years the Gates Foundation will spend \$1.7 billion on myriad smaller initiatives. "We anticipate that about 60 percent of this will eventually support the development of new curricula and networks of schools that work together to identify local problems and solutions," Gates says.

This curricula, however, will be explicitly tied to Common Core and its cousin, the Next Generation Science Standards (which academic reviewers rate of even more obviously low quality). Similar experiments in New York and Louisiana, the latter of which Gates cites, have yielded uniformity but not uniformly good curricula or proven improvements for student achievement.

"[H]igh-quality curricula can improve student learning more than many costlier solutions, and it has the greatest impact with students of novice and lower performing teachers. We also know it has the greatest impact when accompanied by professional learning and coaching," Gates says. This is entirely true. But who
(See Bill Gates, page 4)



Why Megan McArdle Shouldn't Lose Faith In School Choice Just Yet

by Joy Pullmann

Originally appeared at *TheFederalist.com* on October 27, 2017. Reprinted with permission.

Megan McArdle is the latest rightish person to cast shade on school choice after a few studies found initially negative effects on kids' math achievement in Louisiana's voucher program. Although after a few years they leveled up again, these were the first negative school voucher effects found in any high-quality studies. Her October 23 column at *Bloomberg.com* asserts, "We libertarians were really wrong about school vouchers." I partially agree with that statement, but for much different reasons.

McArdle's reasons essentially boil down to "We've got a bunch of voucher programs now, but U.S. public education still stinks and it looks like many parents have different education priorities than I do." Here are a few key paragraphs:

Some studies suggest that voucher programs do modest good; others suggest that they do very little; and a few suggest that the impacts are actually negative. My overall takeaway from the literature is that voucher programs probably do a little bit of good. But the emphasis

is on the word 'little'; they are not a cure-all, or even much of a cure for anything. It was reasonable to think, in 1997, that voucher programs could change the world. Now we have two decades of evidence....

McArdle then says maybe the modest academic effects studies keep finding for school vouchers happen because a new study finds that parents care more about environment:

The socioeconomic status of the students in a school is somewhat easier for parents to observe than the quality of the pedagogy. It's not then, all that surprising that when researchers sat down to analyze parental decision-making in New York City public schools, peer group seemed to be what parents were looking at. And peer group matters a great deal.

McArdle thus concludes that school choice is less legitimate because many families use that opportunity to choose a specific school culture and relationship networks for their kids. Nope. This is in fact more evidence that school choice is a success.

Are Parents' School Preferences Legitimate?

Let's start here by taking a look at a National Bureau of Economic Research

working paper, the only research McArdle directly cites in the column. Notably, it studies not vouchers but how parents choose among public high schools in New York City. They rank their choices among those available, and a centralized mechanism uses those rankings plus schools' own criteria to assign kids. So this system is not especially comparable to access to private schools, although the paper says parents' real preferences are "weakly" in line with how they rank schools on the application on average.

The paper finds that parents' top two preferences for the schools they rank on the application are home proximity and academic performance. The researchers then control for the part of achievement that comes from kids' natural ability rather than superior teaching. This results in the conclusion that parents actually prefer schools with smarter kids ("peer quality") rather than ones that are better institutionally at moving kids' test scores up.

The authors say this is troubling and negates one of the promises of school choice, of improving instructional and curricular quality. Instead, they suggest choice more efficiently sorts smarter kids into better schools.

This is the authors' statement:

Our findings imply that parents' choices tend to penalize schools that enroll low achievers rather than schools that offer poor instruction. As a result, school choice programs

may generate stronger incentives for screening than for improved school productivity.... If parents respond to peer quality but not causal effectiveness, a school's easiest path to boosting its popularity is to improve the average ability of its student population. Since peer quality is a fixed resource, this creates the potential for socially costly zero-sum competition as schools invest in mechanisms to attract the best students.

Actually, This Shows How Smart Parents Are

Several responses. First, it seems reasonable that rating systems that look for how much a school adds to students' test scores penalize schools that have higher starting scores, because their students have less of a gap to close. Schools with more smart kids may thus also have great instruction that shows up less on value-added measures. The reverse of this argument has been used with some success to complain about judging teachers in low-achieving schools based on student test score growth year after year.

Second, the idea that the general public knows the difference between high natural ability that produces good academic performance versus exemplary teaching that produces good academic performance is widely disproven by a number of scholarly and popular works on IQ and testing. In other words, just because parents send their kids to schools
(See *School Choice*, page 4)

Bill Gates (Continued from page 3)

decides what is “high-quality curricula”? Press releases and buzz or proven results?

The latter not only takes time to establish, but is directly threatened by the anti-learning environment inside which most curricula is created and teachers are trained, which typically dooms its effectiveness. Further, most measurements of curricular success use test score bumps, but there are major questions from the research about whether those benefit kids or society long-term. The metrics for success that make the most sense to Bill Gates do not actually ensure success for children. The prospects for his “evolution” are, then, foreboding. The most likely outcome is the historically most frequent outcome from big-bucks philanthropy in public education: sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Gates’ Philanthropy Proves Money Can’t Buy Success

Look, I want Gates to succeed. He and Melinda obviously mean well and have means to do good. They are handicapping their own success at education philanthropy, however, by attempting to approach schools precisely opposite to the manner in which Gates innovated to earn his own professional megasuccess. Gates made it big by creating things that solved people’s problems and which they could choose whether to use. Millions of people individually initially chose (as opposed to later company actions after going big, in which Microsoft used its size to coerce people to use their products) to use Microsoft products because they personally saw value in exchanging their time and money for those products.

One of the key problems of public education that makes it of such poor quality and resistant to change is that it is built on the later Microsoft model of coercion rather than the early Bill Gates-the-whiz-programmer model of free exchange. Public schools get money and students whether families really want to dedicate those resources or not. Twice as many parents send their kids to public schools as really would like to, if they had the choice. Thus, teachers and schools are not rewarded in direct correlation with the needs and desires of their

customers. This is a core reason public education persistently perpetuates bad curricula, bad teaching methods, and poor attention to kids’ specific needs.

The Gates Foundation is so close, yet apparently so far away from realizing why the mountain of money they can shovel around has so far not been as effective for American kids as they earnestly desire. Last year’s annual letter from foundation CEO Sue Desmond-Hellman, its first major admission of failure, prefaced Gates’ own groping this week at why: “Unfortunately, our foundation underestimated the level of resources and support required for our public education systems to be well-equipped to implement [Common Core]. We missed an early opportunity to sufficiently engage educators – particularly teachers – but also parents and communities so that the benefits of the standards could take flight from the beginning.”

Here’s Gates this week, echoing that theme in announcing changes to his giving strategy: “We believe this kind of approach – where groups of schools have the flexibility to propose the set of approaches they want – will lead to more impactful and durable systemic change that is attractive enough to be widely adopted by other schools. ... [W]e will leave it up to each network [of schools we fund] to decide what approaches they believe will work best to address their biggest challenges.” This is good, but not good enough.

I have been hard on Gates over the years for Common Core because he has used his fabulous financial power irresponsibly. He’s forced American citizens into an experimental and at best academically mediocre policy fantasy that has further eroded American government’s legitimacy, which depends upon the consent of the governed. He and Melinda may mean well, but they haven’t done well on this major initiative. It’s going to take a lot more than passive-aggressive side references to their failure to make up for the years of classroom chaos their bad ideas inflicted on many U.S. teachers and kids without their consent. A direct apology and dedication to the “first, do no harm” principle would be a start.

School Choice (Continued from page 3)

that perform better more because of the student body than the teachers doesn’t mean that is parents’ intent. They look and see high achievement and say I want my kids to be part of that. That’s not bad.

In fact, this intuition is backed up by research that finds that one’s academic output is a little like one’s gene expression: Environment can’t change the underlying ability students have, but it can either help a student reach the top of his or her ability or shunt him or her down to its lower bound.

These NYC parents aren’t stupid or prejudiced. Peer group matters. Research finds that being placed into a classroom with more misbehaving peers is likely to

increase a child’s bad behavior; kids of single moms are less likely to become single mothers themselves if they live in a mostly married neighborhood; and disadvantaged students are brought up

to higher achievement by being placed into classrooms with higher-achieving peers. What we need in not just schooling but society at large is for more people to aspire towards the behaviors, social networks, and attitudes of high achievers, rather than accept the soft bigotry of low expectations based on background.

All this paper really shows is that test results are highly correlated, not



with school quality, but with native intelligence. This is something we’ve known since the 1960s Coleman Report. That was one of its bombshell findings, and it has since been widely and repeatedly replicated. Since the scientific debate over the extent to which achievement is hardwired versus environmental is far from settled, it seems unfair to blame parents so prematurely for making choices to place their kids at high-achieving schools.

It’s even more so when you consider that public schools have become increasingly segregated by race and income largely because richer people — who are disproportionately people of higher IQ — can and do buy their way into better, more expensive, public school districts. Eliminating programs that broaden choices to less-wealthy people does not reduce peer-group selection. In fact, the research finds school choice programs integrate races and classes far better than assigned public schooling does. So, even if we assume both that this is happening and that it is bad, a choice system is less bad on this score than traditional school districts are.

Most Programs Aren’t Designed to Offer Good Choices

If the problem is that there are simply not enough good schools to go around, well, that is something not only not well-addressed by public school systems (hence decades of searching for improvements), but it’s a key problem with existing voucher programs. They are not designed to increase the supply of good schools.

Places like the *Wall Street Journal* and right-leaning think tanks have wildly celebrated the proliferation in choice programs since Republicans began leading a majority of state legislatures.

I think the cheer has outpaced the reality. The number of children using vouchers is minuscule, and by design, since most programs have very low participation caps. Using EdChoice and NCES data, I estimate that less than 1 percent of U.S. K-12 kids use school vouchers today. No wonder it’s not “working miracles.” It’s affecting very few Americans.

These programs are also regulated by the same people whose failures at running public school systems generated pressure for vouchers in the first place.

Exhibit No. 1: Many voucher programs require participating schools to administer state tests, which are notorious for poor quality, mostly connected to Common Core, and well-recognized as putting curriculum in a headlock of failed education-school ideas.

Exhibit No. 2: School-choice initia-

tives so far have not appropriately deregulated state private-school laws to better fit a choice environment. Most states regulate private schools a lot more than most people would expect, in deeply important ways such as teacher certification and curricula, as well as accreditation. The quick summary is that it’s essentially impossible to get a private school going that can participate in a school choice program from the get-go, like charter schools do. Further, if one does open or even operate an existing private school, it is pushed by regulations to behave more like existing public schools than something superior.

Thus, all school choice programs have done, besides with other counterproductive regulations imposing extra regulatory barriers to participation, is provide a modest way to fill empty seats in existing, already overregulated private schools. This is not a market that will produce hardly any new choices for families. So, again, it’s not surprising that research finds these programs do, on balance, benefit both participants and kids at nearby public schools, but that the effects are rather modest. That’s about the best in academic effects we could hope for such underfed, weed-choked tokens to the concept of parent choice in education.

There’s one area in which vouchers are already a huge, clear success, and it’s an economic area, so I’m surprised



McArdle missed it. Existing programs offer slightly better long-term results for kids and society — at dramatically less expense than public schools. The typical choice program costs \$3,000-\$6,000 per kid. The average annual per pupil spending in public schools

is \$12,000. The math is not that easy, of course, but even when people smarter than me work it out, you cannot ignore the fact that existing school choice structures offer a slightly better product at a deep discount.

Given that states face impending fiscal nightmares, not to mention the federal government’s, this ought to be seen as yet another major reason to dramatically accelerate the growth of genuine parent choices in K-12 education.

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IN THEIR OWN (GOOD) WORDS

“One of the evidences that our society has become more materialistic than idealistic is the general presumption that all problems can be solved by spending more money. Nowhere is this delusion so rampant as in the field of education.”

— Phyllis Schlafly
The Phyllis Schlafly Report
May, 1974