

The Public School Forum's Friday Report

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On Monday, March 29, at 1:00 p.m. ET, the U.S. Department of Education will issue a press release announcing Phase I winners of the Race to the Top competition.

A Friday Report "Must Read" Recommendation . . .

"The Death and Life of the Great American School System," by Diane Ravitch
Offers a Thought-Provoking Contrarian Viewpoint on Testing & Choice

In what has been described as a complete 180 degree reversal of positions, highly regarded education historian Diane Ravitch has authored a book contending that testing and school choice plans are undermining education. That, coming from one of the most influential early supporters of high-stakes accountability plans and charter schools, has garnered editorial attention and fostered debate from one end of the country to the other.

Currently a professor at New York University and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, Ravitch served as Assistant Secretary of Education and Counselor to Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander in the George H.W. Bush administration. Later Clinton appointed her to the National Assessment Governing Board which oversees federal testing. She has authored over twenty books on education.

For nearly two decades she has been an ardent supporter of the accountability movement as well as experimentation with charter schools. In her latest book, however, she traces the impact of the testing and choice movements and reaches the conclusion that instead of improving education, today's testing and accountability plans are narrowing the curriculum and depriving young people of a well-rounded education. She also concludes that instead of serving as laboratories that would experiment with approaches that could benefit all public schools, charter schools have become competitors that have the potential to strip away motivated students and parents and leave public schools faced with greater demographic challenges than they face today.

She also tracks the emergence of a kind of "national group think" that is best reflected through the current Administration's support of accelerated choice plans and privatization and extreme consequences for low performing schools including wholesale firings of staff in low-performing buildings.

“Must Read” Recommendation (cont’d)

This book deserves to be read by all those involved in school improvement initiatives. Regardless of one’s ideology, Ravitch pulls together a comprehensive analysis of school reform efforts dating back to the sixties and her conclusions should spark an important, and possibly overdue, reassessment of school reform efforts to date.

Supreme Court Ruling Could Have Sweeping Consequences

The State Supreme Court this week heard arguments in a case that could have sweeping consequences for schools and young people in North Carolina and beyond. The case centers on the question of whether students who are suspended from school can also be denied access to alternative schooling options.

Currently if a student is given a long-term suspension (i.e., usually for the balance of the school year) they may or may not have access to alternative schooling. That, according to lawyers for two Beaufort County high school students who were suspended for five months, denies them access to a sound, basic education as guaranteed by North Carolina’s constitution.

Attorneys for the school district argue that students forfeit their right to an education when they commit an offense that warrants suspension. They further argued that the court should not intrude into this area as it is a local decision.

The case has garnered national attention and comes at a time when advocacy groups are arguing that suspension without educational alternatives is contributing to the state’s high drop out and failure rates. North Carolina has the fourth highest school suspension rate in the country. Whatever the ruling, the case will have major implications for schools and for young people.

Over 500 School Administrators Gather in Raleigh

School administrators from across the state convened in Raleigh this week for the NC Association of School Administrator’s leadership conference. Attendance at the conference was at an all-time high – possibly a reflection on the degree to which local school officials are concerned about the state of North Carolina’s budget and possible cutbacks in education support in the months ahead.

The conference began with a panel discussion called “Money Matters” that included Barry Boardman, Chief Economist for the NC General Assembly, Phillip Price, Associate State Superintendent for Financial and Business Services, Kerry Crutchfield, Director of Financial Services for the Forsythe County Schools, and John Dornan, Executive Director of the Forum.

Over 500 School Administrators (cont'd)

The conference is scheduled to end today with a panel discussion that will include Bill Harrison, the Chair of the State Board of Education, Scott Rauls, President of the Community College System, and Erskine Boyles, UNC President. June Atkinson, State Superintendent, and Hope Williams, President of NC independent Colleges and Universities. Governor Perdue is scheduled to speak at the event.

CMS Board Votes to Start Teacher Layoffs

As the district braces for a second difficult budget year, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg (CMS) school board, this week, voted to start layoffs of approximately 600 teachers and cut pay for all (224) assistant principals in 2010-11. Superintendent Peter Gorman said he can still scale back on job cuts if the budget picture improves, but if he doesn't start now "we lose the ability to have it as a tool".

Gorman says teachers with low ratings on job evaluations will be at the top of the layoff list. Tenure and subject matter will also play roles. Except for low performers, teachers will be protected if they teach math, science, special education, English as a second language, Montessori, health occupations, "Project Lead the Way" and foreign languages. In addition, Teach for America teachers coming back for a second year and teachers recruited to low-performing schools through strategic staffing are also protected.

The number of teachers losing their jobs could change, based on forecasts for county and state cuts and voluntary departures. Individual notices are required to go out by May 15th.

Reassigning School Staff to Get Grants

Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools would have to reassign 50 percent of the teachers at one school and remove two principals, one of them the district's 2008 Principal of the Year, in order to receive up to \$12 million in federal grant money. Superintendent Don Martin said that the decision to pursue the grants has nothing to do with the quality of work of the principals and teachers. In addition, he said that they would be offered positions elsewhere.

If grants to the state made through the federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) are approved, Petree Elementary School and Kennedy Learning Center, would each be eligible for up to \$2 million a year for three years.

School board members said they are not happy about the requirements but think that it is too much money to turn down. If approved, the first round of funds would become available in July.

“Is Your Vision Cloudy?”

This week, Glide Education and Wilson County Schools in North Carolina announced a launch of the Glide Education Cloud Computing Pilot Program. Glide Education is a comprehensive cross- platform cloud computing solution for schools providing students, teachers, school administrators and parents with a full suite of online and offline rights based productivity, collaboration, advanced web search and social networking applications. The Glide platform is designed to support mobile classroom and distance learning, teacher training, parent participation and school administration.

The Wilson County School System has fourteen elementary schools, six middle schools, three traditional high schools, one early college high school, one alternative learning center, and one professional learning center. The Wilson County School System serves approximately 12,500 students in kindergarten through adult education. The full press release can be accessed by [clicking here](#).

NC Pilot Helps Teachers Track Student Progress

Some North Carolina teachers are using handheld wireless devices to track student progress in math and reading. It's a new statewide pilot program involving 42 schools in Cumberland, Halifax, Onslow and Sampson counties.

The devices teachers carry contain different exercises. The teacher asks the questions, and the student answers. The teacher then records that in the device, but it tracks more than just right or wrong answers. By marking how the student came up with the answer, the software gauges how well the student is grasping number concepts.

Teachers can use that data to group kids based on their progress and tailor instruction accordingly. At a glance, a teacher can know how every student is doing. “We have to be data-driven in order to understand how an instructor is getting across to the children,” said Aurelian Springs Principal Carla Amason. The program started in November and will last for one year. State education leaders said they are hoping to extend the program to 18 months so they have more data to examine.

National News...

In Defense of More School

At a time when school districts across the country are moving toward a four-day week as a cost-cutting measure, it is refreshing to hear a strong and thoughtful argument in favor of more school, not less. [Click here](#) to read such an argument. It was written by Chester Finn, a former Assistant Secretary of Education for the U.S. Department of Education.

Michigan's Governor Pushes Teacher Retirements

Michigan Governor, Jennifer Granholm is proposing an idea that would encourage tens of thousands of fifty and sixty-something, pension-eligible teachers and state employees to retire. The idea is provocative in that it seeks to immediately create a lot of jobs in a state desperate for them by rapidly accelerating generational employment change already underway. It assumes that 39,000 retirement-eligible Michigan school personnel (and 7,000 state employees) will take the offer and create openings for job-anxious twenty-somethings.

The proposal encourages retirement by increasing monthly pension benefits for school and state personnel who leave this year. In addition, the plan eliminates retiree dental and vision benefits for those who don't leave as well as having them kick in 3 percent of their salary towards a pension benefit that would effectively be capped at 2010 levels.

Governor Granholm's proposal adds another layer to what is a difficult issue regarding Michigan's future, the growing generation gap created by years of tax and budget policies that benefit the Centurion Silver cohort at the expense of the young. As Michigan loses its talented and educated young to other states, its population is aging. In 2005, 12 percent of Michigan's population was age 65 or older. It's expected to rise to 20 percent by 2030.

Forum News...

2009 Local Finance Study is Here!

The Public School Forum's annual Local Finance Study is available for order. This study has become the "last word" in county expenditures on schools. The study annually ranks North Carolina's 100 counties on their actual spending on schools as well as the effort they make in supporting schools. School boards, finance officers, and county commissioners routinely rely on the Forum's annual study as budget decisions are made.

"The Local School Finance Study done by the North Carolina Public School Forum is one of the best financial planning tools available to local leaders. It allows a county to determine with great accuracy how able they are to fund their public schools and how well they compare with other counties in doing that. I encourage all superintendents, school board members and county commission members to use this tool to make the best financial decisions on how they use their local funds." - *Jim Causby, North Carolina School Superintendents' Association*

"The Finance Study is a great tool for benchmarking a school district; the information analysis is essential to making a rational budget augment with detractors." - *Bill McNeal, North Carolina Association of School Administrators.*

2009 Local Finance Study (cont'd)

“The Local School District Finance Study, published by the Public School Forum, is an excellent source of information to help educate the public about the degree of commitment of boards of county commissioners to funding their public schools. I use the report to help boards of education work with their commissioners to improve education in their respective school districts. The Public School Forum is to be commended for their continued work in this important area.” – *Ed Dunlap, North Carolina School Boards Association.*

“You don’t really understand school finance in this state until you understand the Public School Forum’s Local Finance Study.” - *Tim Simmons, Wake Education Partnership*

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