

VALLIANT NEWS

Accountability a question in Nevada school-choice program

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Standardized tests are a given in public school, and they're mandatory for Nevada private schools participating in the state's budding school-choice program.

"We're not one of those schools that find testing expectations to be onerous or unacceptable," said Sue Blakeley, founder of Lake Mead Christian Academy in Henderson, a Las Vegas suburb. "We believe having the opportunity to educate children is a sacred trust and we should hold ourselves to a really strict accountability."

But it's not clear how the state will hold the schools accountable if students aren't progressing.

The law creating a tax-credit voucher program for low-income families requires the public reporting of testing data for schools in the initiative every other year starting in 2018.

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The state is figuring out the details. So far, the education department has put off any discussion of consequences for the schools, and says it is gathering the data so lawmakers can have "an intelligent discussion."

Joe McTighe of the Council of American Private Education said imposing public school-like accountability on private schools creates only the appearance of school choice, and can possibly undermine the intent.

"If the governments regulate schools too tightly, what we have in effect is robbing parents of genuine school choice with the appearance of school choice," McTighe said.

In more than half the country, there are voucher-like programs that allow families to use public money and resources to send their children to private school. The programs generally require that private schools register and report on things such as health and safety inspections, financial statements and student attendance. In many, students must take a standardized test.

The National Conference of State Legislatures and other groups say they're only aware of three states — Louisiana, Indiana and Wisconsin — where private schools have been restricted or banned over standards and regulations.

Louisiana has penalized low-performing schools by limiting the number of new students they can take. In some cases, schools removed from the program have been reinstated after showing improvement. Only one private school has ever been banned permanently.

“We’re not trying to draw a distinction between the top school from the second-to-top school,” said John White, the Louisiana state superintendent. “We’re trying to draw a line at the bottom of the scale. What’s acceptable or what’s not acceptable.”

Joshua Cowen, an education policy expert at Michigan State University, said most states haven’t confronted the problem because their programs are fairly new.

“Nobody’s gonna say ‘I’m for bad schools to keep operating,’ but what should be the mechanism to get those schools closed?” Cowen said. “This is the next debate, how do we get the regulatory framework right?”

The American Federation for Children, the pro-voucher group previously lead by current U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, said it supports standardized testing but didn’t commit to any consequences for poorly performing schools.

“We’re focused on academic accountability. We’re more comfortable with it,” said Scott Jensen, the advocacy group’s senior adviser.

Groups such as Ed Choice and the Cato Institute say parents should have the final say on where their child goes to school.

They argue that the “right fit” for a student is even more important than objective academic measures such as test scores and classroom gains that always have been used to consider public school performance. A private school catering to a specific disability or a facility away from gang turf is far more consequential to the students’ lives than any exam, according to advocates who reject testing as an end-all measure.

“There’s never been absolute agreement on how choice works for kids and therefore we have these two camps who really divide on test-based accountability,” said Patrick Wolf, of the University of Arkansas, who has studied the long-term academic paths of voucher students. “Do we want to allow a thousand flowers to bloom or do we want to heavily garden and trim back the ones that aren’t as beautiful?”

Nevada’s Lake Mead Christian Academy now enrolls 82 students under the state voucher program. They have received more than \$415,000 in the first two years of the program.

Blakeley said her school welcomes scrutiny of its student achievement data. Other private schools, she said, can choose not to participate if they disagree with the state’s assessment process.

“You really have to perform because people aren’t going to pay for something they can get free,” Blakeley said. “Make yourself accountable to the product. You can’t shy away from test scores and school rankings.”