

## ARTICLE TAKEN FROM ATLANTA JOURNAL CONSTITUTION

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### Education on the upswing

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It's not yet surfaced on the radar screen, but this school year ends with some wonderfully revolutionary prospects for public education.

Reasons abound to be hopeful that Georgia is not forever mired in 49th place. The good news is that the tide has turned in conservatives' favor. Locking down reform will take another dozen years or more. But the pieces are coming together.

The die was cast by the federal No Child Left Behind law, with its emphasis on standards, accountability and parental empowerment. That, incidentally, is an example of the president's approach to major reform. He plants ideas, some of them quite dramatic, with the understanding that they will blossom slowly, developing momentum and constituencies as they evolve.

No Child Left Behind is one. Health savings accounts, the seed idea that will ultimately revolutionize the way we think, buy and consume medical services, is another. Personal savings accounts for Social Security is another. Faith-based social services fit the definition, too.

All are based on recognition that in a democracy, fundamental change comes slowly — largely because the status quo in education, health care, retirement and other social services is protected by those who profit from it, and by those whose dependency makes any change frightening. And, of course, by politicians whose power depends on convincing us that they get us services paid for with somebody else's money.

Even before No Child Left Behind, Georgia was moving in the right direction. The state is far advanced toward establishing and testing a common curriculum, with performance standards for promotion. It's a pretty commendable curriculum, too. The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, in reviewing math and English/language arts standards, ranks it in the top 10 nationally.

The state school board last month adopted the new math standards, which will be phased in over several years, and will require all students to know the content of a rigorous algebra course, for example, that's now taken by only about 20 percent of graduates.

Georgia has been a laggard in developing charter schools, which are laboratories of parent/educator creativity, and which offer public school parents a choice. The state has only 40, with more than 1,800 public schools, but six more will open this fall.

A task force appointed by Gov. Sonny Perdue is doing something potentially far-reaching as well. It's identifying learning outcomes the state wants and commissioning experts to come up with a per-student cost. Variables will, of course, be computed. One size doesn't fit all.

For the first time we're defining the outcomes we want and pricing them out. We're not measuring success on how much we spend, the way we've traditionally been asked to look at it.

Two good things can happen with that information. One is that the money can follow the child, based on parental choice. The other is that with a uniform curriculum — and eventually a grading system that has uniformity — local systems can be freed to manage so that they're judged on results.

Other pieces came together in this year's General Assembly. A master teacher bill introduces the idea that teachers will be compensated based on student outcomes. A virtual high school bill creates the possibility that individual students anywhere can have access to the best curriculum and instruction available anywhere. And even the Cobb County computer project holds promise that a "school" can be anything, anywhere students and teachers connect.

Problems remain, for sure. Teacher education is one. But even there, reason for hope exists. In March, the Georgia Professional Standards Commission told Fort Valley State that it cannot admit new students to its teacher education program until further notice, effectively shutting it down after current students graduate. Its students score well below state averages on tests measuring their reading, writing and math abilities and their knowledge of subjects they plan to teach. That's a start.

Gloomy about public education? Not me. The tide has turned.