

US STATES MOVE TO EXPAND AGE KIDS MUST BE IN SCHOOL

LAS VEGAS: A dozen states are trying to keep children in school longer, from making kindergarten mandatory to raising the legal drop-out age. But it's not an easy sell. Nevada is among the states this year that have or are considering proposals to stretch the compulsory attendance age. A bill that would require children in Nevada to start school at age 5 was met with such resistance that it was amended to age 6. Current state law sets the age at 7. The proposal is likely to go nowhere, as the Nevada legislature was set to adjourn yesterday.

"If you're really concerned about kids dropping out, I don't think making kindergarten mandatory is really the heart of the issue," said Maggie England, who opposes the Nevada bill and wants to homeschool her three children. Supporters admit that it wouldn't have much of an impact on enrollment numbers - and therefore school budgets. State officials estimate that about 95 percent of 6-year-olds are already learning in a formal capacity. What's to be gained, then, said Nevada Assemblywoman Olivia Diaz, is the message that the state sometimes mocked as the "Mississippi of the West" is taking seriously its mission to turn things around in its glaringly

deficient schools.

"I believe every child deserves a fair and equal shot at the American dream and that starts with school," said Diaz, the bill sponsor who is also a Las Vegas-area teacher. "I just think it's going to be a philosophical argument and we're just going to have to agree to disagree. As a teacher, and as an assemblywoman who represents a very at-risk population, this is fundamental."

The conversation among advocates is often tinged with this kind of anxiety about economic disparity. Their debate is centered as a moral imperative, extolling research on the importance of access to education, particularly for poor and disadvantaged children. Lately, education access has also seen a heightened, urgent interest on the national stage, ranging from college tuition to daycare and pre-kindergarten. The compulsory school age issue gained peak momentum when then-President Barack Obama in his 2012 State of the Union address urged states to raise the dropout age to 18.

In the past decade, both Republican and Democrat lawmakers have pushed for changes that would stretch the compulsory school attendance age, in some

states requiring children to be in the classroom for as many as 13 years, from age 5 to 18. This year alone, at least six bills were proposed in Mississippi to expand the years that children must be in school. All of them have failed. Arizona, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Indiana, New Jersey, South Carolina, Montana, Mississippi and North Carolina also have considered the issue this year.

Nearly all states require free education to be offered by age 5, though in half the country, children don't have to start school until they're 6 years old. There's mandatory kindergarten in several states, while Pennsylvania and Washington don't require attendance until age 8. These state laws - some more than a century old - began as a tool to fight truancy. The status quo generally has been to allow teens to drop out at age 16.

Critics

The critics are advocates of homeschooling and limited-government who say that parents should have ultimate authority over their children, including when and how their kids are educated. Homeschoolers contend that the children who are not going to school are

likely in unstructured programs at home that aren't registered with the local school districts and that not every child is suited for a paper-and-pencil classroom confinement.

"I can appreciate it and I can appreciate the need for it, but if it's available, I don't see why it needs to be mandatory for people like me because you're taking away my rights," said England, the mom against the Nevada bill. England is planning to teach her children at home near Reno because she said she doesn't have confidence in the local school district. "Nevada is literally 50th in the country for school so I wouldn't say we're doing it right, right now," England said.

Grover "Russ" Whitehurst of the Brookings Institution's Center on Children and Families says the flaw in this movement is its emphasis on quantity, not quality, with lawmakers too frequently operating on their gut. The education policy expert says compulsory laws can produce some small effects but it's not quite the grand vision lawmakers push. His research has found that raising it to 18 doesn't actually increase the graduation rate. "It's intuitive in the sense that you would think if school does us any good, more of it would do us

even more good," Whitehurst said. "Nothing seems irrational. It's not that it's a bad thing to do. But if you expect to see graduation rates zooming, you'll likely be disappointed."

That seems to be the case in South Dakota, which has expanded the mandatory school age on both ends. In 2006 and 2007, lawmakers approved bills that made the compulsory age 5 to 18. The state's secretary of education, Melody Schopp, said the graduation rate is about the same but said the total number of dropouts is down. She said the law helped incentivize schools to create new career-focused programs to keep older teens engaged.

So while not everyone gets a diploma in four years, many of those who were likely to leave school with nothing are now getting GEDs or certifications to do other kinds of jobs. And she's also not bothered by the lack of measurable improvements academically for the younger children who have gone through the mandatory kindergarten programs. "Being fed and kept warm. School is where there is a caring adult," Schopp said. "There's other benefits you can't measure on an academic scale that are really important to me." — AP

IT WON'T BE FROM SEA-TO-SEA; HOW LONG WILL US WALL BE?

WASHINGTON: The White House insists that plans for US President Donald Trump's border wall are on track despite resistance from Congress. What it's not saying is how it envisions the wall these days. Trump's promise to build a "big beautiful wall" and have Mexico pay for it was a campaign rallying cry. It conjured images of an imposing structure spanning the 3,200 km of America's southern border, too tall and strong for foreigners to dare cross illegally.

But since Trump took office, his top aides have made clear that's not on their drawing boards. It won't be "from sea to shining sea," Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly told lawmakers. So how long will it be? And how much of it will be a thick new wall as opposed to patching up existing fences and other measures? The answers aren't clear. A look at what is known about the state of the wall.

What candidate Trump said about the wall

From the start of his campaign, Trump said building a wall at the Mexican border and having Mexico pay for it was a priority. His campaign website said his administration would "begin working on an impenetrable physical wall on the southern border on day one." Trump never speci-

fied exactly what he wanted, but his words suggested a wall stretching from Brownsville, Texas, on the eastern end of the border, to San Diego at the western end. At times he suggested the wall would be at least 30 feet (9 m) high, even promising to add an extra 10 feet (3 m) after former Mexican President Vicente Fox used an expletive to say that Mexico wouldn't pay for the program.

What the administration says about the wall now

Days after taking office on Jan. 20, Trump signed an executive order calling for a "physical wall along the southern border." But the order didn't include specific details or say how it would be funded or how much it might cost. In recent months, leaders of the departments that will have the biggest roles in whatever is built have hedged their boss' campaign comments.

Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke acknowledged in March some of the complications a border-long wall would face. He said physical and geographic challenges would make building a wall "complex in some areas," including along parts of the Rio Grande and in a remote and mountainous national park in Texas. Officials from the Homeland Security Department, which is over-

seeing bids for the wall, have said repeatedly they don't know yet the length of the wall the administration will ultimately want to build or how much it will cost.

Kelly has said the administration wants to start by building at least 119 km of wall in Texas and near San Diego, though 23 km of that construction would be a replacement for fencing that's been in place for years. He has said new construction will be planned for areas where border officials say it's most needed. He told a Senate budget panel last month that some of the new construction may be a see-through fence, similar to barriers built by the Bush and Obama administrations.

Paying for the wall

Mexican officials have flatly rejected paying for the wall. US lawmakers haven't been enthusiastic about paying for it either. Trump's request for \$2.6 billion to start the work on an unspecified stretch of border wall was swiftly denied as Congress approved a spending package to keep the government running through the end of the current budget year in September. Instead lawmakers approved \$772 million for border security, including the upkeep and planned replacement of old stretches of border fencing, some built almost two decades ago. Still, the administration promoted this as major progress toward building the wall.

Trump's first full budget request, which would fund the government for the 2018 budget year, asks for \$1.6 billion to pay for roughly 95 km of new wall along two stretches of the border in South Texas and 23 km of wall to replace fencing near San Diego. It's unclear whether Congress will approve that request. Democrats and some Republicans have questioned the need for new barriers as arrests of people caught sneaking across the border fall to record lows.

Current construction

There is a flurry of construction going on at the Mexican border. To the naked eye, it looks like Trump's wall is underway. But it's not. The fencing being built along brief stretches of border in Sunland Park, New Mexico, and Naco, Arizona, is part of a long-planned effort to replace old chain-link fencing that in some cases is decades old. Later this summer, construction is expected to start on prototypes of new kinds of walls, both see-through and solid, in San Diego. — AP



TIJUANA, Mexico: A piece of art with a reflective surface hangs on the border fence as the "Tear Down This Wall" concert is held in Friendship Park on the Mexican side of the US-Mexico border on June 3, 2017. — AFP

BRAZILIAN PRESIDENT LASHES OUT AHEAD OF COURT VERDICT

BRASILIA: President Michel Temer and Brazil's chief prosecutor were in open warfare yesterday on the eve of a court verdict that could lead to the scandal-plagued president's removal from office. The front pages of major newspapers were dominated by accusations made by Temer's lawyer that Prosecutor General Rodrigo Janot is pressuring the Supreme Electoral Tribunal to rule against Temer when it meets to deliver a verdict, starting today.

Temer has been hanging by a thread since the revelation of a secret audio in which he is allegedly heard giving his blessing to payment of hush money by a meat-packing tycoon to a top politician jailed for corruption. But starting today, he faces the separate, more immediate challenge of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, known as the TSE. The TSE is deciding whether abuse of power - principally the use of corrupt campaign money - fatally undermined the validity of the 2014 election in which Temer was reelected vice president with then president Dilma Rousseff.

When Rousseff was impeached last year, Temer took over. If the TSE judges Temer to have been responsible for abuses in 2014, the court could then annul the election results, throwing Brazil into even deeper political chaos. On Sunday, Temer's lawyer Gustavo Guedes claimed that Janot is leaning on the TSE "to pressure the court and find the president

guilty." "We are very worried that the prosecutor general of the republic is using all the apparatus that he has to attempt to pressure" the court, he told Folha newspaper.

The accusation ramped up the tension in the capital Brasilia ahead of the court hearing. The panel of seven judges is scheduled to meet Tuesday and Wednesday before reaching a verdict Thursday - unless an adjournment is called.

Converging crises

The TSE had previously been considered unlikely to declare Temer illegitimate. At most, the court was expected to put the blame for use of dirty campaign money exclusively

on Rousseff. Since she is already out of the picture - having been impeached for breaking government accounting rules in 2015 - the expectation was for the TSE ruling to allow Temer to finish his mandate through 2018. However, the eruption of the hush money allegations against Temer have led to hopes among his opponents that the TSE will seize the opportunity to bring him down.

Even if he survives the TSE, Temer still faces the intensifying corruption probe being led by Janot. Brasilia is swirling with rumors that Janot plans soon to release new secret audio recordings and other evidence compromising the president.

Janot's next step could also be to request formal charges against Temer, leading to a trial in the Supreme Court. Adding to that threat is the likelihood that more suspects in the corruption scandal will strike plea bargains with prosecutors and testify against him.

Chief among those potential new witnesses is a former Temer aide, Rodrigo Rocha Loures, who was caught with a suitcase containing 500,000 reais (\$152,000) of alleged bribe money. He was placed under arrest Saturday but has not yet signalled whether he will agree to cooperate with prosecutors. For now, Temer still has several escape routes. If found guilty by the TSE, he could appeal, potentially staying in office while the process plays out. And even if the Supreme Court accepts an indictment filed by Janot, two-thirds of the lower house of Congress, where Temer still retains significant support, would also have to approve the motion.

In the meantime, the economic austerity reforms that Temer has campaigned hard to push through Congress, calling them key to rescuing Brazil's economy after two years of recession, appear to be increasingly doomed. Eurasia Group consultants issued a note yesterday declaring Temer's chances of survival at 40 percent and the outlook for pension reforms "dire." "As such, we still bet that Temer won't finish his mandate," Eurasia Group said. — AFP



Michel Temer



TOLUCA, Mexico: Alfredo Del Mazo, Mexico state gubernatorial candidate for the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, and his wife Fernanda Castillo greet supporters at the party's headquarters in the capital of Mexico state on Sunday. — AP

MEXICO RULING PARTY CLAIMS WIN IN STATE, RIVALS CRY FOUL

TOLUCA, Mexico: Mexico's ruling party narrowly held onto the governorship of the country's largest state Sunday, according to preliminary election results, but a fiery leftist hoping to ride the race to the presidency cried foul. The election in the state of Mexico, President Enrique Pena Nieto's home state, was closely watched as a bellwether ahead of presidential polls next year. It was a must-win race for Pena Nieto and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which had to fend off a fierce challenge from an upstart leftist party, the National Regeneration Movement (Morena), and its founder, presidential hopeful Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

The PRI's candidate, Alfredo del Mazo, leads Lopez Obrador's protégée, Delfina Gomez, by about two percentage points, according to a rapid count released by the electoral authority. It said Del Mazo won between 32.75 and 33.59 percent of the vote, against a score of 30.73 to 31.53 percent for Gomez. It called the difference between them "statistically significant", with a confidence level of 95 percent, based on a sample of polling stations.

Battle looming?

Lopez Obrador immediately rejected the result. "According to our results, Delfina won," he said in a video posted online. "We will accept no fraud." He vowed to challenge the outcome, though he said his party would do so peacefully. Gomez echoed his rejection. "We won the election," she said. But Del Mazo was quick to deliver his victory speech, promising "a government of inclusion, of unity". The fight may be far from over, with street protests and court

challenges possible. Morena, which has never held a governorship, was never supposed to come this close in the key central state, which cups Mexico City. The PRI has ruled there for more than 80 years. But the campaign in the state of 16 million people turned into a chance for Mexicans to vent their long list of frustrations with the PRI, the party that has ruled the country for 76 of the past 88 years.

Del Mazo comes from a long line of former state governors, including not only his father and grandfather but also Pena Nieto, his cousin. To critics, that smacks of the nepotism and backroom deals they say dog the PRI, a broadly centrist party that has been plagued by corruption scandals, violent crime and a lackluster economy since Pena Nieto ushered it back to power in 2012. Del Mazo, 41, faced a radically different kind of candidate in Gomez, 54, a schoolteacher who played up her humble background as a construction worker's daughter.

'PRI not dead'

His apparent win shows that "the PRI is not dead", political analyst Fernando Dworak told AFP. But the party is still unlikely to win next year's presidential election, he added. Lopez Obrador remains "the candidate to beat" next year, said another analyst, historian Hector Aguilar Camin, in comments to Televisa TV. The firebrand populist, whose enemies say he would lead Mexico down the same path as Venezuela, has a history of fighting long after the voting is done. After his unsuccessful 2006 presidential bid, he proclaimed himself the "legitimate president" as his supporters camped out for weeks in central Mexico City. — AFP

NJ HOLDS GOV PRIMARIES UNDER SHADOW OF UNPOPULAR CHRISTIE

PRINCETON, New Jersey: New Jersey Governor Chris Christie is barred by state law from running for a third consecutive four-year term this year, but the unpopular former Republican presidential candidate remains a central figure in the campaign to replace him. Voters head to the polls today to choose Republican and Democratic nominees to succeed Christie, whose approval ratings have hit historic lows. He has been accused of spending too much time out of state during the 2016 presidential campaign and tarnished by the so-called Bridgegate lane closure scandal.

The lieutenant governor, Kim Guadagno, is the frontrunner in the primary election on the Republican side, while Phil Murphy, a former Goldman Sachs Group Inc executive who served as US ambassador to Germany under former President Barack Obama, holds a solid lead in polling among the Democrats. Guadagno, who won election as the state's first lieutenant governor alongside Christie in 2009, was Monmouth County's first elected female sheriff and, like Christie, served as a federal prosecutor.

With Christie absent frequently during the presidential campaign, Guadagno has already spent months as acting governor. But she has also faced criticism from her

opponents based on her association with the unpopular Republican incumbent. As a result, Guadagno, 58, has tried to execute a balancing act, distancing herself from Christie on some issues like his \$300 million proposal to renovate the aging statehouse in Trenton while taking credit for the state's low unemployment figures.

"In most situations where you have a second-in-command, that person will enjoy some incumbency advantage," said Brigid Callahan Harrison, a political science professor at Montclair University in New Jersey. "In fact, what we see is the exact opposite. His enormous unpopularity is an albatross around her candidacy." At a recent debate, Guadagno sparred with her main Republican rival, Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli, over the latter's plan to hike taxes on millionaires. Guadagno has vowed not to raise any taxes.

Ciattarelli, 55, has criticized Christie, and by extension Guadagno, for the state's repeated credit rating downgrades in the face of budget problems. The latest Stockton University poll, released last week, gave Guadagno 37 percent support among primary voters, with Ciattarelli trailing at 18 percent. About a third of those polled, however, said they remained undecided. — Reuters