



ACUTE SENIORITIS

A senator in Utah wants to save \$60 million a year by making senior year in high school optional for students who complete their requirements early. These students already are allowed to graduate early, but Senator Chris Butters' proposal would provide more incentives for students and make that option clearer. He believes many seniors fritter away their final year of high school anyway. Sometimes the 12th grade means "nothing but playing around," Butters told the *Deseret News*. His savings projection is based on half of the state's high school seniors choosing to graduate early.

LAW SCHOOL FORGIVENESS

Northwestern University Law School has joined Georgetown and Berkeley law schools in offering a student loan forgiveness program for graduates who work in the public sector. Under a federal program, public interest graduates pay only 10 percent of their income toward student loans, and after 10 years in public service, the government forgives any remaining loan balances. These law schools now offer to cover the annual payments in most cases.

NO VOTE, NO PAY

For the second year in a row, Arizona Representative Jerry Weiers is sponsoring a bill to penalize lawmakers a day's pay (about \$175) each time they miss a floor vote. Those with unexcused absences also would have their names posted on the Legislature's website. "We are paid to vote no matter how you look at it," he told the *Arizona Capitol Times*. He believes there's no excuse for skipping floor votes, especially with taxpayers covering lawmakers' \$24,000 annual salaries and the state facing a huge budget deficit.

ONCE A YEAR

Oregon's constitution calls for legislators to meet every other year, but some lawmakers want to meet every year, and they want voters to make it official. A proposed November ballot measure would amend the constitution to require long sessions in odd years and shorter ones in even years, limited to a combined total of 180 days every two years. Proponents argue it would strengthen the Legislative Assembly and allow it to respond more quickly to changing economic conditions. "The legislature meets so infrequently I think there is this vacuum, and it is being filled by other institutions and other forces and sources ... and I don't think that's in the best interests of the way we govern ourselves," Oregon Senate President Peter Courtney told the *Associated Press*. Opponents argue it would put more power in the hands of legislative leaders, reducing openness and accountability. Montana, Nevada, North Dakota and Texas also meet only every other year.

I HAVE AND I DO

A proposed ballot initiative would require North Dakota lawmakers to sign statements that they have read and understood any bill they intend to support and haven't been influenced by bribes or vote trading. The measure, proposed by Jerrol LeBaron of California, also would delay a final vote on any bill in the Legislative Assembly until it had been posted on the Internet for at least four days. North Dakota is the first state where LeBaron is attempting to put the issue on the ballot. Penalties for falsely signing the affidavits could result in a five-year prison sentence and a \$5,000 fine. "I think we have a very open, transparent system of government," Representative Al Carlson told the *Associated Press*. "This is a good idea for California, but it's a screwy idea for here." He points out that the text of bills and amendments are already available on the Internet, as are the schedules of committee hearings when bills are examined in detail.

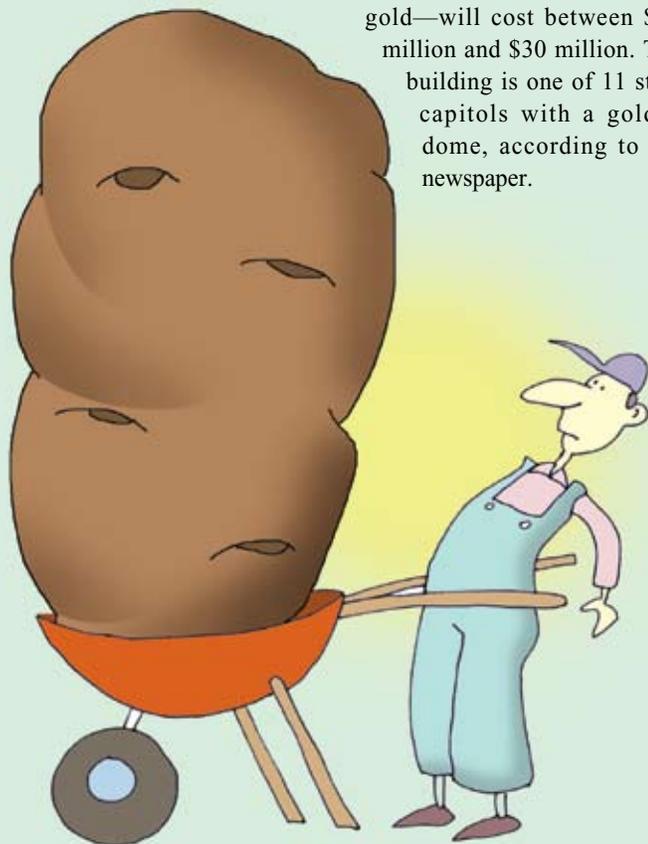


PAPER CUTS

Two years ago, to cut government waste, the Hawaii Senate decided to go paperless. Recently, officials reported it has saved more than \$1.2 million and 800 trees. Bills, testimony and committee reports are put online. The public is given documents on CDs. Senators have laptops. "Doing it this way was so different and daunting at first," Senate Clerk Carol Taniguchi told the *Associated Press*. "Now it really seems to be a way of life."

UNITED STANDARDS

Kentucky is the first state to adopt some of the academic standards for K-12 education from the Common Core State Standards Initiative. The state board of education approved replacing current state standards with the common standards in mathematics and English/language arts. The state education department plans to train teachers this summer and administer assessments designed for the common standards in spring 2012. Directed by the legislature, the state was a national leader in adopting its own standards in 1990.



PUBLIC POTATOES

Spring is just around the corner, and community gardens will soon be sprouting from dozens of public properties in and around Utah's capital. These gardens are part of Salt Lake County's urban-farming initiative, which is transforming more than 150 acres of unused government property into planting grounds for food and even biofuels. Some are tiny quarter-acre plots, while others span as much as 40 acres. County officials are pursuing state and federal grants to cover the costs of preparing the lands for gardens, which should be ready for gardeners by next year.

ENDANGERED DOME

The golden dome of Colorado's Capitol led the state's 2010 list of endangered historical sites, announced by Colorado Preservation Inc. "It's far and away the most historically significant building in the state," Patrick Eidman, program coordinator for the nonprofit organization, told *The Denver Post*. Popped rivets and rusting cast-iron pillars that support the structure are a "real danger," he says. In 2007, an 18-inch chunk of iron fell from the dome. Repairs to the dome—first gilded in 1908 with 200 ounces of 24-karat gold—will cost between \$10 million and \$30 million. The building is one of 11 state capitols with a golden dome, according to the newspaper.

GAPS ON TOP

Since passage of the federal No Child Left Behind act, there has been progress in bringing more students to a basic level of educational achievement and closing achievement gaps. But, according to a new analysis by the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy at Indiana University, the focus on minimum competency has come at a price. There still exist "excellence gaps," differences between subgroups of students performing at the highest levels of achievement. Gaps between students of different genders and racial, economic and linguistic groups are large and persistent for top-performing students. Furthermore, the comparatively small percentage of students scoring at the highest level on achievement tests suggests that children with great academic potential are being underserved, the authors of the report warn.



DRUG TESTS FOR LAWMAKERS

The Missouri General Assembly is looking at requiring drug testing for some people receiving welfare benefits and for elected officials. According to the Associated Press, lawmakers, judges and other state officeholders would receive drug tests before taking office and every two years after that. The officials would pay for the tests, and refusing one would be considered an admission that they used a controlled substance without permission. Likewise, work-eligible adults who apply and receive cash welfare payments would be tested if the Department of Social Services has a "reasonable suspicion" that the person is using drugs. Those who refuse or test positive would not be eligible for the cash benefits for one year. Promoters of the measure said it would be hypocritical not to also require elected officials to be tested.