

cape Council for American Private Education outlook

"Voice of the Nation's Private Schools"

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Bipartisan Education Savings Accounts Bill Introduced

It has become something of a Congressional ritual in recent years: the introduction of bipartisan legislation to provide tax breaks for parents who invest in education. In the current Congress, Senators Tim Hutchinson (R-AR) and Robert Torricelli (D-NJ) have teamed up to play out the ritual yet again by sponsoring S. 306, a bill that permits parents to set aside up to \$2,000 per year in education savings accounts (ESAs) that would earn tax-free interest.

This year may be the charm for ESAs. Past efforts to secure their enactment have been stymied by vetoes. But with President Bush being a strong advocate for the accounts — even supporting a generous \$5,000 cap on annual contributions — the prospects for their enactment are promising.

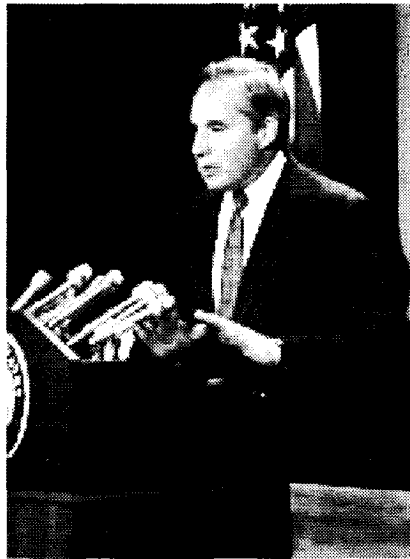
The savings accounts proposed in S. 306 would build on existing college-only accounts by expanding the annual limit from \$500 to \$2,000 and by allowing the money saved to be used not only for college costs, but also for expenses associated with elementary and secondary education. The bill names the accounts "Coverdell Education Savings Accounts" after Senator Paul Coverdell of Georgia, a steadfast and articulate champion of ESAs, who died of a stroke in July.

Private Funds for Education

In a news release announcing the bill, Senator Torricelli said ESAs would "bring in new, private funds to education" and would pump "billions of dol-

lars" into both public and private schools. "The real winners will be the kids who will get the quality education they deserve," he said.

Both Torricelli and Hutchinson, in coordinated statements, emphasized the broad benefits of education savings ac-



Senator Robert Torricelli (D-NJ) at a press conference.

counts. Parents of children who plan to go to college would benefit from having the annual cap raised from \$500 to \$2,000; parents of children in private schools would be able to use the accounts for tuition; and public school parents could spend the money on things like home computers, tutoring, after-school programs, and school supplies.

"Public education is no longer totally free," said Torricelli. "There are

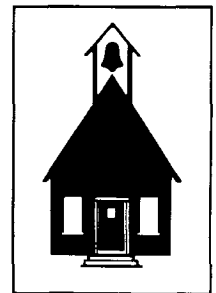
numerous expenses that public schools just cannot afford." He noted that the Joint Committee on Taxation has estimated that 75 percent of the parents that use the accounts proposed in S. 306 would be public school parents.

Senator Hutchinson also struck the theme that the accounts would help, not hurt, public education. "ESAs leave public money in public schools while giving parents increased resources for their child's increasing education needs," he said.

Important Role of Private Schools

Turning to the bill's benefits for private school parents, Torricelli noted that for some inner-city families, private schools provide a critical alternative to under-performing public schools. ESAs established by corporations, employers, or unions could help parents choose private school options without draining dollars from public schools. "Private schools play an important role in our society," he said. "They alleviate some of the burden on public schools."

The Council for American Private Education supports the enactment of ESA legislation. You can urge lawmakers to vote for ESAs by visiting CAPE's Legislative Action Center at <http://www.capenet.org/pubpol.html>.



President Offers Budget Blueprint

President Bush announced a budget plan last month that establishes education as his top priority, earmarking an 11.5 percent increase for the category, the highest of any area in the budget. His spending blueprint (details are expected in April) contains several components likely to affect—directly or indirectly—private schools.

The president proposed a \$5 billion, five-year Reading First program, aimed at helping children in the early grades learn to read. The program's focus will be students at risk.

To provide parents with greater control over their children's education, Bush said he would require states to publish public school report cards and post them on the Internet. He also reiterated his proposal to allow low-income parents of students in persistently low-performing schools to use Title I funds for tuition in private schools. Other parent choice items in his budget include:

- \$150 million in seed money for charter schools;
- the establishment of K-12 education savings accounts with a \$5,000 cap on annual contributions;
- the opportunity for students in dangerous schools to transfer to safe schools (according to an Administration official, private schools would be among the transfer options when public schools are overcrowded);
- funds for grants to expand and to research school choice.

To encourage people to become teachers and to ensure they are properly trained, the president called for consolidating various teacher development and recruitment programs into a single fund with an enhanced budget of \$2.6 billion.

He also proposed expanding college loan forgiveness limits from \$5,000 to \$17,500 for math and science teachers in high-need schools and increasing funds tenfold (to \$30 million) for the



President Bush addresses Congress and the nation on his budget priorities.

Troops-to-Teachers program, which helps members of the military become classroom teachers. Bush even asked Congress to employ the tax code to assist teachers by allowing them to deduct up to \$400 in out-of-pocket

classroom expenses.

Program Consolidation

The budget outline includes a number of proposals to combine some single-purpose programs into more fluid categories. One streamlined program would consolidate the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities (SDFSC) program with the 21st Century Community Learning Centers to create a fund for after-school programs and drug and violence prevention programs. Many private schools currently participate in the SDFSC program, and the president has proposed allowing faith-based and community organizations to establish community learning centers, so this newly combined program would likely provide for private school participation.

Another streamlined program would combine various instructional technology programs, including the E-Rate, into a single grant—again with potential impact on private schools, though in this case not a positive one. Many private schools participate in the E-Rate precisely because it is *not* a direct government grant program.

Education Secretary Rod Paige praised the president's budget plan saying it "gives us the resources to accomplish his goal that no American child be denied access to a quality education."

Court Watch

The long and winding road of constitutional challenges to school choice got somewhat shorter and straighter last month when the full U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit refused to rule on the constitutionality of the Cleveland Scholarship Program. The day after the refusal, lawyers for the Institute for Justice announced they would ask the U.S. Supreme Court to take the case.

In December a three-judge panel of the Sixth Circuit said the Ohio program violated the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution because it had the "impermissible effect" of promoting religion. Attorneys asked the entire Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals to review the 2-1 decision, which was at odds with a ruling by the Ohio Supreme Court that upheld the program.

"We are now only one step away from the definitive U.S. Supreme Court ruling on the constitutionality of school choice," said Clint Bolick, the Institute's vice president and litigation director. "The Sixth Circuit's decision is inconsistent with decisions of the Wisconsin and Ohio state supreme courts. Now is the time for the U.S. Supreme Court to resolve this conflict."

The Cleveland program, established in 1995, was the first government-funded voucher initiative to include religious schools. It provides low-income children with scholarships of up to \$2,250 to use at private schools.

"If the Sixth Circuit's decision is allowed to stand, almost 4,000 low-income kids will be forced to return to the failing Cleveland public school system," Bolick said. "The Supreme Court should not allow that to happen and we hope it will soon consider their plight."

The Institute for Justice, which represents five families who currently benefit from the scholarships, expects that the program will continue, pending a final decision by the U.S. Supreme Court.



University of California President Seeks End of SAT

Could a private school be the cause of the downfall of the SAT?

When Richard Atkinson delivered his much-publicized speech last month denouncing the use of the SAT for college admissions, he said it was a visit to "an upscale private school" that coalesced his concerns about the test and stirred him to action. At the unnamed school, Atkinson, the president of the University of California (UC), watched a class of 12-year-olds working on verbal analogies and learned that those students spent hours each month preparing for the big test. "The time involved was not aimed

at developing the students' reading and writing abilities," he said, "but rather their test-taking skills. What I saw was disturbing."

After actually taking sample SAT tests himself and reviewing the research literature, Atkinson concluded "that America's overemphasis on the SAT is compromising our educational system." Accordingly, he asked the academic senate at UC to consider (1) dropping the requirement that student applicants to the university take the SAT I and (2) requiring only "standardized tests that assess mastery of specific subject areas rather than undefined notions of aptitude or intelligence." He also recommended that the university not rely excessively on "quantitative formulas" for admission, but instead look at applicants "in a comprehensive, holistic way."

As former director of the National Science Foundation, chairman of the National Research Council's Board on Testing and Assessment, and researcher in the field of cognitive science and psychology, Atkinson brings some impressive credentials to the dialogue on standardized testing. At one point he even served as Distinguished Visiting Scholar at the Educational Testing Ser-

vice, which produces the SAT.

Atkinson was quick to make clear in his address before the American Council on Education, an association that represents the country's accredited colleges and universities, that he is by no means opposed to all standardized tests. "Developed properly and used responsibly, standardized tests can help students gauge their progress and help the general public assess the effectiveness of schools," he said. His concern is not with standardized tests that "assess knowledge in well-defined subject areas," but with "the appropriateness of the SAT in college admis-

sions." Those tests, he said, "do not have a demonstrable relationship to the student's program of study" and are mistakenly assumed "to measure innate ability."

Consistent with his support for achievement tests, Atkinson called for the development of standardized tests "directly tied to the college preparatory courses" required of student applicants to UC. He wants the tests to measure "clearly defined" competencies and to reflect what students study in a challenging high school program. "Students from any comprehensive high school in California should be able to score well if they mastered the curriculum."

Until the new tests are available, Atkinson wants the university to continue its current practice of requiring that applicants take at least three SAT II tests, including writing and mathematics. The SAT II measures knowledge of specific subject areas and is based on a typical college prep curriculum for that subject. Atkinson says the SAT II "begins to approximate" an appropriate test for college admission because it tests students "on specific subjects that are well defined and readily described."

But the UC president also wants to

make certain the college admission process is not overly reliant on any standardized test, even one that measures mastery of a college prep curriculum. He wants the process to be "more holistic, more comprehensive," taking into consideration not only what students have accomplished, but also "the opportunities available to them." Such judgments involve evaluating not only the quality of the high school a student attends but also the conditions of a student's upbringing. "A student who has made exceptional progress in troubled circumstances needs to be given special attention." Atkinson readily admits that assessing students "in their full complexity" will be labor intensive and costly. And admissions decisions will be difficult because they require judgments about "the opportunities available to individual students" and involve interpreting the relative value of "grades earned in different courses taught at very different schools." But, he says, "the stakes are too high not to ensure that the job is done right."

It is too early to tell whether Atkinson's proposals will take hold even in California, much less across the country. Doing away with a test that has so dominated the college admissions scene is no small feat, especially when questions persist about alternative criteria being any more accurate or fair when it comes to measuring readiness for a rigorous post-secondary program. Still, Atkinson is convinced that colleges need an admissions process that relies more on achievement than aptitude and that inspires students to focus on "mastery of subject matter rather than test preparation." Regardless of the outcome, there's little doubt his proposal has at least launched a serious debate.

Atkinson's speech is available at www.ucop.edu/ucophome/commserv/sat/speech.html.



Sample Question

1. The president of the University of California has proposed doing away with
- (A) the SAT II
 - (B) the SAT I
 - (C) all standardized tests
 - (D) all tests
 - (E) none of the above





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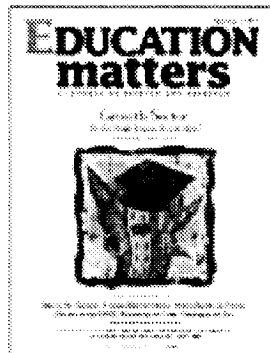
capenotes

• Lisa Keegan, Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction, has an unorthodox definition of public education: education paid for by the public, where money follows the child to any school that works for that child.

At an education symposium sponsored by the Hoover Institution and *Education Matters*, Keegan offered a rapid-fire series of comments about education policy, including a defense of President Bush's proposal for standardized testing in reading and math in grades 3 to 8. She said those who object to the tests because they interfere with instructional time are like patients asking doctors to dispense with blood tests and X-rays because they take away from treatment time. Reliable, objective measures of student performance are critical, Keegan argued, especially for children who might otherwise be left behind.

In a luncheon address at the symposium,

First Lady Laura Bush spoke about her three top priorities for education: recruiting teachers, promoting successful pre-reading programs, and providing parents with information to help their children learn.



Paul E. Peterson, who heads the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University, spoke about *Education Matters*, a new journal of opinion and research in education. Peterson is editor-in-chief. The journal's mission statement says it will "steer a steady course" in the "stormy seas of school reform" and will "give voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments."

The first issue is a gem, with articles by Ted and Nancy Sizer, E.D. Hirsch, Jr., Diane Ravitch, Terry Moe, and John Chubb. To subscribe (a one-year subscription costs \$20) visit the journal's Web site at www.edmatters.org.

• How can faith-based organizations help to improve public schools?

That was the focus of a lively roundtable discussion last month hosted by The Brookings Institution. A panel of educators and policy analysts, moderated by Brookings Senior Fellow E.J. Dionne, Jr., responded to two papers presented by Mavis Sanders of Johns Hopkins University and Dennis Shirley of the Lynch School of Education at Boston College.

Both papers offered numerous examples of how religious institutions have already been enlisted to assist public schools. The list included recruiting volunteers to tutor, offering crisis intervention, providing workshops for parents, and honoring and supporting teachers.

Of course, when working in the civic, secular forum of public education, faith groups cannot address the area they know best: matters of faith. Presenters warned of the perils of proselytizing, prayer, or other inappropriate expressions of religious activity by faith-based groups in public schools.

More information about the Sacred Places, Civic Purposes project of The Brookings Institution is available on the Web at <http://www.brook.edu/gs/projects/sacredplaces.htm>.