

Council for American Private Education

CAPE outlook

Voice of America's private schools

Bush's Budget Includes \$100 Million for School Choice

President Bush has proposed a federal budget for FY 2007 that includes \$100 million to expand educational opportunities for students attending under-performing public schools that have failed to make adequate improvement in six year.

Called the America's Opportunity Scholarships for Kids program, the new initiative would provide competitive grants to states, school districts, and non-profit organizations, including faith-based organizations, that in turn would award scholarships allowing children either to attend private schools or to receive intensive after-school or summer tutoring.

The private school scholarships would be worth up to \$4,000 and could be used by low-income families to cover tuition,

fees, and transportation costs. The tutoring scholarships, worth up to \$3,000, would expand the current Supplemental Educational Services (SES) program, enabling students to receive additional hours of instruction.

Under the *No Child Left Behind Act*, poor-performing public schools that have failed to make adequate yearly progress for six years are identified as in need of restructuring. Only students in those schools would benefit from the new proposal. Currently, school districts are supposed to provide such students with the opportunity to attend better-performing public schools. But according to a briefing paper prepared by the U.S. Department of Education, many districts "face obstacles in

providing students with the opportunity to attend more effective schools," and most schools that accept transfers under the program "do not generally have substantially higher achievement levels than the schools under restructuring." The president's new proposal is designed to help students in chronically under-performing schools by offering them an expanded range of attractive opportunities. The department's paper makes the case this way: "Students should not be left behind as schools are in the process of restructuring."

The new proposal is part of a \$2.77 trillion budget plan that President Bush submitted to Congress February 6. The proposed budget includes \$54.4 billion in discretionary education spending.

School Choice Proponent Is Elected House GOP Leader

Representative John A. Boehner (R-OH), an unwavering proponent of school choice throughout his 15 years of service in Congress, was elected House majority leader February 2. Boehner, who served as chairman of the Committee on Education and the Workforce, brings to his new position a fire-in-the-belly passion for choice reminiscent of a former majority leader, Dick Armey.

In recent years, Boehner, 56, has played pivotal roles in advancing the right of parents to choose their children's schools and in ensuring the equitable participation of all students in various federal education programs. He helped spearhead the D.C. voucher initiative through the House in September 2003, imploring his colleagues during the floor debate to "bring some hope to children who today do not have hope." He asked, "How can we continue to turn our heads and look the other way when we know that children's lives are being ruined because they are consistently put in schools that are not performing?"

Last fall he vigorously advanced a plan

for education-related relief in the wake of the Gulf Coast hurricanes. Private school advocates hailed the proposal as a streamlined solution that protected the autonomy of participating schools. Although Boehner's proposal did not prevail intact, its principles helped make the House-Senate compromise bill significantly better than it otherwise would have been.

In a meeting in March 2003 with CAPE's board of directors and state representatives, Boehner spoke of his strong belief "in the power of school choice." He described his approach to choice as incremental—setting "bricks in the foundation" one by one. He said that in his entire career he had never dealt with a policy issue "that has etched

a spot on my soul like this issue of education." Expressing frustration about the "achievement gap in American education between advantaged students and their disadvantaged peers," he said the nation

must "make the commitment that we're going to educate all of our kids." His personal commitment seemed clear. Referring to children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and are stuck "in a rotten neighborhood and a rotten

school," Boehner said, "I'm going to do something the rest of my life to help make sure that these kids are not forgotten."

Those kids now have an advocate in Congress with considerably more influence to ensure they are not forgotten.



Newly elected Majority Leader John Boehner meets the press. (House Republican Conference photo)

CAPE member organizations:

- Agudath Israel of America
- American Montessori Society
- Association Montessori International—USA
- Association of Christian Schools International
- Association of Waldorf Schools of N.A.
- Christian Schools International
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
- Friends Council on Education
- Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
- National Association of Episcopal Schools
- National Association of Independent Schools
- National Catholic Educational Association
- National Christian School Association
- Oral Roberts University Educational Fellowship
- Seventh-day Adventist Board of Education
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
- 28 Affiliated State Organizations

a coalition of national associations serving private schools K-12

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Study Challenges Private School Advantage

Sacramento is one of the sunniest cities in America; Seattle is one of the cloudiest. But let's overlook that fact for now and instead compare the weather in both cities by neutralizing any advantages Sacramento might have. We'll discount all those extra sunny days, disregard above-average temperatures, and ignore the below-average rainfall.

Not surprisingly, our filtered comparison yields a suspicious finding: that Sacramento's weather is just as bad as Seattle's. Of course, the flaw with the finding is that it rests on a series of statistical conditions that exist only in a hypothetical world, not in the real world. We might be able to imagine a sunless Sacramento, but our mental construct would never convince residents to snub the city's agreeable climate and head north.

Somewhat akin to the Sacramento/Seattle exercise is a study released last month by Christopher Lubienski and Sarah Theule Lubienski, of the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. The study compares the performance of fourth- and eighth-grade private school students with that of public school students on the math portion of the 2003 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). Looking at scores straight up without any statistical maneuvers, the Lubienskis find what countless other researchers have found, namely, that private school students significantly outperform their public school counterparts. But then the authors, using a technique called hierarchical linear modeling (HLM), subject the data to a series of statistical filters that serve to strip away the private school advantage. The predictable post-filter finding is that students in public schools equal or exceed the performance of those in private schools.

Of course, the same procedure could be carried out with any two sets of data—public suburban schools and public urban schools, crop yields in Iowa and Kansas. The approach would be the same: neutralize the observed advantage of Set A and then go on to demonstrate that, absent the advantage, Set A is no better off than Set B. Tautologies work every time.

But aside from its speculative circularity, the study suffers from several other problems. First, some measures are unrefined. A family's income, for example, is captured not by precise levels, but by eligibility (or ineligibility) for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program. In effect, it is

reduced to a "yes or no" category. In fact, lunch eligibility, combined with students' reports on home resources such as magazines, newspapers, computers, encyclopedias, and other books, constitutes the entire measure of family socioeconomic status (SES). (Other variables controlled by the study include race, ethnicity, gender, limited English proficiency (LEP), and special education status as measured by receipt of an individualized education plan (IEP).)

But even if all the measures were precise, a study that merely establishes statistical correlations cannot definitively answer the root question: Do certain types of schools by themselves cause improved student performance? Any measure of student performance reflects a complex mix of forces. The challenge for researchers is to discriminate school

effects—the value the school brings to the equation—from non-school effects. But a correlation between two variables does not necessarily mean that the two are causally connected in that a change in one *causes* a change in the other. Only by conducting a controlled experiment can one determine with certainty the influence of the school on student performance. It would be a matter of randomly selecting a large group of students and then randomly assigning some students to one type of school and some to another to see if one group grows to a different degree and at a different rate. The Lubienski study is not a randomized experiment.

The important distinction between correlation and causation is illustrated by the interplay between student performance and the family's socioeconomic status. The correlation is clear: in large-scale studies, as student SES goes up, so does performance. But the precise dynamic between the two variables is not clear. Just how are they connected? Some researchers assume that SES is a non-school variable that independently affects performance apart from any school influence. But what if high-SES families place more value on education than low-SES families and are, as a consequence, more motivated to place their children in high-quality schools? What if they are more skillful at finding such schools and more likely to have the resources to ensure that their children attend them? Few would argue that families of means are better able to afford a house in a high-performing suburban school



Guidance Issued on Hurricane Relief

The U.S. Department of Education has issued guidance on the implementation of the *Hurricane Education Relief Act*, a new law that provides assistance to schools either damaged by the recent Gulf Coast hurricanes or serving students displaced by the storms. The far-reaching guidance provides clear direction to schools seeking to participate in the programs and converts the dense structure and language of the legislation into easily understandable text.

The department produced two guidance documents, one covering the Emergency Impact Aid for Displaced Students program and the other covering what has come to be called the Restart program, which is designed to help damaged schools get back in service.

New and Critical Information

Although much of the guidance merely restates the statute's provisions in plain language, some of it provides new and critical information for participants. For instance, the department has determined that quarterly count dates will play a pivotal role in deciding whether schools get reimbursed for educating displaced students. Essentially, if a displaced student is enrolled in a particular school on the count date, the school receives funds (typically \$1,500) for the entire quarter. Conversely, if the child is not enrolled on the count date, the school does not receive funds for the quarter, even if the child attended the school for most of the period in question.

The department has suggested four quarterly count dates: October 1, 2005; December 1,

2005; February 1, 2006, and April 1, 2006, but each state is free to select four specific count dates that fall within a range of ten days before or ten days after the suggested dates. Whatever dates they select, states must consistently apply them to all applicants within the state.

Under the new law, public school districts serve as the conduit for funds for the education of displaced students attending private schools. Parents of eligible students apply to school districts for the funds, and school districts in turn apply to the state education agency. A district's application to the state must include a description of the procedures it will use to receive funding requests from parents and to make payments to accounts for private school students. The application must also contain an assurance that the district will make payments to those accounts within 14 days of receiving its allocation from the state.

By January 26, school districts were supposed to have provided the state with the numbers of displaced students enrolled in public and private schools during the first two quarters of the school year. But recognizing that it may take some time to count those students retroactively, the guidance allows states to make upward or downward revisions to their counts on or before April 30, 2006.

The two guidance documents, presented in question and answer format, are essential reading for anyone participating in the hurricane relief programs. They are available on CAPE's Web site at www.capenet.org/new.html.

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district, or to pay private school tuition, or to navigate their way into the best magnet schools. Under those circumstances, SES, which is generally regarded as a non-school influence, would actually be masking a school influence.

The study is further hampered by the nature of NAEP data. Lubienski and Lubienski note that the data are not longitudinal and "do not allow for examinations of individual student growth in achievement over time." They correctly judge that "one cannot definitively conclude from this analysis that public schools are more effective at promoting student growth than other school types."

One final point about the study: Like the Sacramento/Seattle exercise, the hypothetical simulation the researchers undertake can only be carried out in a statistical program on a computer. But children do not attend statistically modeled classrooms in computers; they attend real classrooms in real neighborhoods with real classmates and real teachers. You can't go into

a real class of students and reconstruct it by excluding certain factors. It is what it is.

And parents know that. They don't make decisions about schools based on national averages or HLM computer models. They study and compare particular schools—School A and School B—and they ask, Is this school the right match for my child? Does it support our family's religious beliefs and values or does it undermine the moral code we're trying to teach at home? Does it set high standards and expectations? Are the classrooms safe, orderly, and conducive to learning? Are teachers caring and demanding? What is the school's academic track record? Those are the questions parents ask in deciding whether a given school matches their expectations of what a school should be. And just as individuals consider actual weather patterns, rather than abstract, hypothetical statistical models, when assessing a region's climate, parents make decisions about education on the basis of actual conditions in actual schools.

The study is available at www.ncspe.org.

Civic Values

What kind of job do private schools do in transmitting to students the values necessary for good citizenship? Patrick Wolf, associate professor of public policy at Georgetown University, set out to answer that question by examining the empirical evidence accumulated in 20 research studies on the effectiveness of schools in instilling civic values.

Wolf looked only at studies that attempted to control for the contributions families might make to a child's civic development. He categorized the findings by the rigor of the control the study used, placing in one category studies that employed random assignment, matching, or instrumental variable analysis, and placing in another those that relied on more common and less conclusive control methods.

The author considered the effects of schools on seven civic values: political tolerance, voluntarism, political knowledge, social capital, political participation, civic skills, and patriotism. When all seven values are measured together, the 20 studies "suggest the general effect of private schooling or school choice on civic values trends neutral-to-positive." Of the 48 results that the 20 studies produced, 14 indicated "generally positive effects of school choice or private schooling on civic values"; 15 were "contingently" positive; 16 were neutral, meaning school choice and private schools neither increased nor decreased civic values; and only three demonstrated negative findings.

Wolf offered this summary of his findings: "The statistical record thus far suggests that private schooling and school choice rarely harm and often enhance the realization of the civic values that are central to a well-functioning democracy."

Wolf's findings constitute a chapter in a new book from the Brookings Institution titled *Getting Choice Right*.

Return service requested

CAPE notes

★ **Fast Fact About Private Schools:** Eighty percent of students in private schools come from families in which two parents are in the household, while 18.4 percent come from families in which only one parent is present. Another 1.6 percent are raised by nonparental guardians. For all K-12 students in the country (public, private, and homeschooled), 70.9 percent are in two-parent households; 26.2 percent are raised by one parent, and 3.0 are cared for by nonparental guardians. *Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey of the 2003 National Household Education Survey Program.*

★ The number of students who were homeschooled in the spring of 2003 was 1,096,000, according to a report just released by the National Center for Education Statistics. The figure reflects a jump of 29 percent from the 850,000 students homeschooled in 1999. Nationwide, the percentage of U.S. students being homeschooled was 2.2 percent in 2003, up from 1.7 percent in 1999.

Why do families homeschool their children? The parents of 31.2 percent of homeschooled children said their most important reason was concern about the environment of other schools, including safety, drugs, or negative peer pressure. Another 29.8 percent said their most important reason was to provide religious or moral instruction for their children, while

16.5 percent cited dissatisfaction with academic instruction at other schools as their main reason.

The report, titled *Homeschooling in the United States: 2003*, notes the following: “The homeschooling rate was also higher for students in families with three or more children in the household than for students in families with fewer children, higher for students in two-parent households than for students in one-parent households, and higher for students in two-parent households with only one parent participating in the labor force than for students with other parent labor force participation patterns.”

The report is available at <<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2006/homeschool/>>.

★ The federally funded voucher program for Washington, D.C., saved the city nearly \$8 million in 2004-05 and netted the D.C. Public School System (DCPS) \$5 million, according to a new study released January 31 by the Cato Institute and the Milton & Rose D. Friedman Foundation.

The report, titled *Spreading Freedom and Saving Money: The Fiscal Impact of the D.C. Voucher Program*, reasons that the federal government paid the full cost of educating the 1,027 voucher

students in 2004-05, thus saving the city the revenue it would have normally transferred to the DCPS on behalf of those students. Researchers Susan L. Aud, a senior fellow at the Friedman Foundation, and Leon Michos, an adjunct professor of economics at George Washington University, calculated that savings to be \$7,958,402. But although the city saved that amount, the school district actually lost it, as it loses funds for any students transferring out of the system. More than offsetting the nearly \$8 million loss, however, was a \$13 million federal grant to DCPS, which was part of the voucher package. Thus, the public schools realized a net gain of \$5 million (\$13 million minus \$8 million). As the authors of the study put it, “The voucher program saves the D.C. government money and at the same time has a positive effect on the DCPS revenues.”

But what if federal funds were withdrawn and the city had to fund the program itself? Aud and Michos conclude that the city would still save \$258,402 over what it would cost to have the voucher students in public schools.

Spreading Freedom and Saving Money: The Fiscal Impact of the D.C. Voucher

Program is available at <http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=5365>.

