

Council for American Private Education

# CAPE outlook

Voice of America's private schools

## President Bush Holds Summit on Faith-Based Schools

Saying that the country's inner-city faith-based schools are closing "at an alarming rate," U.S. President George W. Bush called on Congress and elected officials at the state and local levels to help preserve such schools and to extend "lifelines of learning" to the children they serve.

At the White House Summit on Inner-City Children and Faith-Based Schools, held April 24, the president said religious schools are "a glorious part" of the nation's history. "We have an interest in the health of these centers of excellence; it's in the

country's interest to get beyond the debate of public/private, to recognize this is a critical national asset that provides a critical part of our nation's fabric in making sure we're a hopeful place."

The president said that between 2000 and 2006, nearly 1,200 faith-based schools closed in America's inner cities, affecting nearly 400,000 students and placing an added burden on public schools.

"In neighborhoods where some people say children simply can't learn, the faith-based schools are proving the nay-sayers wrong. These schools provide a good, solid academic foundation for children. They also help children understand the importance of discipline and character," Bush said.

The summit brought together about 300 leaders in education, policy, research, and philanthropy to focus on the contribu-

tions of faith-based schools in urban areas, to highlight the challenges those schools face, and to identify ways to help them continue to serve students and communities.

Karl Zinsmeister, the president's domestic policy adviser, told attendees that faith-based schools "are not only important to the people who use them, but they are important to the common good of the nation as a whole." He expressed discomfort with the terms "public schools" and "private schools," explaining that the latter are in effect public institutions in that they serve the public good. He prefers to distinguish the two types of schools not by the people they serve (because they all serve the public) but by whether or not they are run by the government.

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### Alternatives Needed Now

Zinsmeister said weak inner-city public schools are plagued by "abysmally low" student achievement and unacceptably high drop-out rates. Only 52 percent of students in major urban school districts "leave high school with a diploma." But while reform efforts to fix the problem are going on, families in inner cities "can't wait for these public schools to turn themselves around. They need alternatives for their boys and their girls right now."

Zinsmeister said the "sole escape

hatch" for many inner-city families is the neighborhood faith-based school, "where somewhat miraculously, educators with a mission have taken many of the very same children who are floundering in chaotic public schools and given them direction and stability and skills." Preserving such schools is one way to provide a quality education to disadvantaged students. "These schools are there. They work. They are desperately needed by the children whose... childhood is going to be gone long before the education reform movement reaches their block."

As one mark of the success of religious schools, Zinsmeister said research indicates "that compared to other students of the same demographic background, minority students in urban Catholic schools are 42 percent likelier to complete high school."

### Internationally Accepted Norm

Dr. Charles Glenn, a member of CAPE's board and interim dean and professor at Boston University's School of Education, told the summit that "the right of parents to choose the schools that children attend is an internationally accepted norm." Every country in the world except North Korea, Vietnam, and Cuba "allows parents to choose schools" and every Western democracy except the United States "provides public funding to support those choices." In every instance that countries fund schools that parents choose, "religious schools are among those that are funded," and in almost all cases they are "the majority of the schools that government funds in addition to its own schools." What's more, government support for religious schools in other countries has not "caused conflict within these countries."

Professor Glenn argued that it is important for both educators and government officials to ensure that private schools retain their distinctive character and mission

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President George W. Bush stands with Aysia Mayo-Gray, a student at St. Ann's Academy in Washington, D.C., who introduced the president at the White House Summit on Inner-City Children and Faith-Based Schools, April 24, 2008. (White House photo by Chris Greenberg)



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- Agudath Israel of America
- American Montessori Society
- Association Montessori International—USA
- Association of Christian Schools International
- Association of Christian Teachers and Schools
- 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
- Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Schools
- 31 Affiliated State Organizations

a coalition of national associations serving private schools K-12  
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even when they receive public support. He said maintaining a “freedom of conscience” on the part of schools is essential “because if schools are no longer able to be distinctive, then the right of parents to choose schools becomes meaningless.”

### Spelling Quality “A-B-C”

Another of the more than two dozen speakers at the summit was Dr. Vernard T. Gant, who directs the Urban School Services Department at the Association of Christian Schools International. Dr. Gant said that the schools he serves spell quality with the letters “A-B-C,” signifying an education that is academically excellent, Bible-based, and character-shaped. He told the story of a woman who had become a single mother at 14 and wound up living in public housing. Her three children were attending school in one of the worst-performing school districts in the nation, with 64 of its 78 schools under academic probation. He described her gratitude and relief at learning she had received a scholarship to send her children to a Christian school, “a school that would make a difference in the lives of her children.”

Gant said the woman’s story had reminded him of his own journey. He too was born in the projects, but his mother sent him and his brothers to Faith Lutheran Academy in Mobile, Alabama, because she believed that “an education was the way out of the projects.” When Gant asked his mother how she could afford private school tuition, she said, “Why do you think I was leaving the house every day to go clean other people’s houses? I was determined that my boys were going to get a good education.”

Gant said his mother sounds like many other mothers that he’s heard over the years who “despite their circumstances, despite their conditions, only want something better for their children.”

He said that to see these schools, “these centers of hope,” disappearing reminds him of the passage in the Book of Proverbs: “Hope deferred makes the heart sick.” He ended his remarks by asking, “If the deferred hope sickens the heart, what happens to a heart where there’s no hope?”

### Operation Jewish Education

Rabbi David Zwiebel, general counsel and executive vice president of Agudath Israel of America and a member of CAPE’s board of directors, was part of a panel addressing how various communities are trying to keep religious schools viable. Zwiebel explained that slightly more than 50 percent of the cost of operating a Jewish day school comes from tuition, with much of the rest coming from private philanthropy.

Zwiebel focused on some successful large-scale

efforts to raise private funds, including the Kehillah Jewish Education Fund in Chicago, which encourages every member of the community to contribute what they can. A premise of the program is that “schools are not merely goods that are to be consumed by consumers but they are communal assets” in which “every single member of the community has a stake.” In the past two years about 1,000 families have contributed close to \$1 million to the fund, which supports nine Orthodox schools in the region.

Another fund-raising project, this one launched by Chicago real estate developer George Hanus, encourages Jews to designate 5 percent of their estates to endowment funds established by Jewish day schools. The program is called “Operation Jewish Education/The 5 Percent Answer.”

### Constitutional Parameters

Anthony Picarello, general counsel for the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, examined the state and federal constitutional constraints and opportunities that courts have presented to the executive and legislative branches of government when it comes to school choice initiatives. He reviewed key tests established by the U.S. Supreme Court to determine the constitutionality of state aid to help students attend religious schools. Two principal approaches taken by legislators to stay within the court’s limits, he said, are voucher programs and tax credits to offset educational expenses. Vouchers were upheld by the court in its 2002 decision *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, and tax credits were upheld in the 1983 ruling *Mueller v. Allen*. Picarello also explored in detail the challenges presented by state constitutions that contain Blaine Amendments, which to varying degrees prohibit aid to religious schools. He concluded his remarks noting that “with respect to all these limits...the precise contours are unclear and the jurisprudence is in flux. It will require people with the right combination of courage and prudence to test those limits in court and to expand the constitutional space where creative laws and programs can flourish.”

Dr. Ronald Bowes, assistant superintendent for the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh, described an especially successful state-level tax credit program. Pennsylvania’s Educational Improvement Tax Credit provides corporations with credits of up to 90 percent for donations to scholarship organizations to help students attend private schools or to educational improvement organizations to support innovation in public schools. Bowes reported that since 2001, over \$400 million has been distributed to families through the initiative. He urged the group to encourage Congress to establish a similar program at the federal level.

## D.C. Mayor Supports Choice Measure

In a stunning reversal on school choice, District of Columbia Mayor Adrian M. Fenty told a Congressional panel last month he supports the continuation of federal funds for the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program, which helps about 1,900 students in the District to attend religious and independent schools.

Fenty is the second successive Democratic mayor of the District to support the measure. But when his predecessor, Anthony Williams, promoted the country's first federally funded voucher program back in 2003, then D.C. Council member Fenty was a strong and outspoken opponent of the initiative.

Testifying April 30 before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Financial Services and General Government, Mayor Fenty said he supports the commonly named "three-sector" proposal in President Bush's budget that would provide \$18 million each for public school initiatives, charter schools, and the scholarship program, an increase of \$4-5 million per program from last year. The budget also includes another \$20 million to spark further school reform in the District.

The formula for developing a "world-class education system" in the District is by "strengthening the entire education system," said the mayor. "We have to be supportive of education in all different arenas."

Vincent Gray, chairman of the District's City Council, also endorsed the three-pronged approach at the hearing.

### Decisive Lift

Fenty's support could provide the decisive lift in what will be a tough battle to reauthorize the scholarship program. Although some members of Congress oppose scholarships to help low-income children escape poor-performing schools, many of those opponents respect the right of home rule and local control for the District. The mayor made clear that the three-part proposal had been worked on by representatives from all the sectors affected and had the backing of D.C. Schools Chancellor Michelle A. Rhee.

With the mayor, the City Council chairman, and the schools chancellor on board, the "local control" requirement would appear to be met.

### Huge Proponent of Choice

In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* last December, Chancellor Rhee said, "I would never, as long as I am in this role, do anything to limit another parent's ability to make a choice for their child. Ever." She described herself as "a huge proponent of choice" and said the District has "an excellent choice dynamic for parents."

Speaking at the hearing in favor of the three-sector approach, Mayor Fenty said, "One of the things that is important in the District of Columbia, because we are just so far behind on education, is that we educate the children and give them excellence by any means necessary as quickly as humanly possible." Fenty said that given the wholesale shake-up of the public school system that he and the chancellor are trying to bring about, it would

be "hypocritical" to fail to recognize approaches outside of public education "that bring ideas and creativity and energy to educating our children." He pledged, "If someone is providing an excellent education to a young person in the District of Columbia, they are going to have the support of this administration."

### Bush Supports Proposal

At the White House summit on faith-based schools (see related story), President Bush strongly endorsed the D.C. scholarship program, saying it has helped some of "the poorest children in our nation's capital find new hope at a faith-based or other nonpublic school."

The president noted that demand for the scholarships was outstripping supply, "which says to me we ought to expand the program and not kill the program." He also said the measure, which is up for reauthorization this year, was one way to help prevent the closings of inner-city religious schools. The president promised to continue to work with Congress to ensure that the program is reauthorized.



District of Columbia Mayor Adrian M. Fenty

## Spellings Leads Summit Panel

During the luncheon session at the White House summit, Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings led a panel discussion on education options in cities.

Acting Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Roy Bernardi, who once served as mayor of Syracuse, NY, said the health of cities is directly related to faith-based schools, which offer opportunity, structure, and a quality education to students. Calling religious schools "an anchor" in neighborhoods, Bernardi said, "It's the not-for-profit and the faith-based organizations that really, really make this country what it is."

Dr. Stephen Goldsmith, chairman of the Corporation for National and Community Service and former mayor of Indianapolis, IN, said that when he was mayor he considered public education as being carried out by a range of institutions, including religious schools, which he regards as "the stabilizing force for our neighborhoods." He also suggested private schools help cities retain middle class families who would otherwise seek better public schools in the suburbs.

According to Goldsmith, the entire community, not just the religious community, should be supporting the social and moral work of religious schools. "The mission of the religious school is critical to the future of the city," he said. It is a community responsibility to keep such schools alive "because saving these schools will save the children."

Goldsmith also made the point that "religious schools actually subsidize the public schools" because they are "educating a child who otherwise would have to be educated with the full cost of the public." So any assistance to students in such schools "is not a transfer of resources from taxpayers to religious schools. It's a way to help the religious schools continue their subsidies."

Return service requested

## CAPE notes

★ Fast Facts About Private Schools: Results from the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing assessment were released last month. According to the report from the National Center for Education Statistics, “Private school eighth-graders outperformed their peers in public schools.” More precisely, on a scale of 1-300, where a score of 158 represents the 50th percentile of eighth-grade scores and a score of 180 represents the 75th percentile, the average public school score was 154 and the average private school score was 173.

★ Dr. Christopher Hammons, an associate professor of political science at Houston Baptist University, has prepared a report for the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice that examines the laws and regulations that govern religious and independent schools in each state. Titled *Fifty Educational Markets: a Playbook of State Laws and Regulations Governing Private Schools*, the report concludes that private schools “are subject to a wide variety of laws and regulations that run the gamut from reasonable rules to ensure health and safety to unreasonable rules that interfere with school curricula, preventing schools from pursuing the educational approaches that work best for their students.”

The report grades “the extent to which states regulate private schools” on a scale of A to F. “States with higher grades embrace a free-market conception of education to

a greater degree than states with a lower score.” Twenty-two states earned a grade of D or F, which for the author signifies that these states “regulate private schools in unreasonable ways, so that the schools’ opportunity to compete in the education marketplace is threatened by excessive government barriers.” Eighteen states received an A or B, and 10 earned a C.

The Friedman report is available at <http://www.friedmanfoundation.org/friedman/research/ShowResearchItem.do?id=10095>. A companion online tool for comparing state regulations in detail is available at <http://www.friedmanfoundation.org/friedman/schoolchoice/pslr.jsp>.

★ The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Non-Public Education has published *The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act: Provisions Related to Children with Disabilities Enrolled By Their Parents in Private Schools*. The office describes the publication this way: “This booklet expands upon the Department’s existing IDEA guidance and provides a user-friendly format for state and local education agencies officials, public and private school administrators, parents, and other stake holders interested in the IDEA requirements related to parentally placed private school children with disabilities. This resource explains the provisions of IDEA regarding the equitable participation of children with disabilities who have been enrolled by their parents in private schools.

It addresses timely and meaningful consultation, child find, parental consent, expenditures, services plans, the complaint process, and other related topics.”

The new publication is available in both HTML and PDF format on the Office of Non-Public Education’s Web site at <http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/speced/privateschools/index.html>.

★ The Thomas B. Fordham Institute has issued a new report on urban Catholic schools. According to the study, over 1,300 Catholic schools have closed since 1990, and most of them have been in cities. The closings have affected some 300,000 students and have cost taxpayers more than \$20 billion “to accommodate the additional students that public schools have had to absorb.”

A teaser in the executive summary asks a few provocative questions: “Is this a crisis worth addressing? Are further closures inevitable, or can church leaders, parishioners, philanthropists and/or public policymakers reverse these trends? Should they try?” The report offers some responses. It also presents findings from a national survey on Catholic schools and spotlights several success stories on how schools have expanded in Wichita, Memphis, and Denver.

Download *Who Will Save America’s Urban Catholic Schools?* at <http://www.edexcellence.net/institute/publication/publication.cfm?id=383>.