

Council for American Private Education

CAPE outlook

Voice of America's private schools

Off-Year Elections Signal Hope for School Choice

Much has been written about the political fallout from the unexpected victory of Massachusetts Republican Scott Brown in last month's Senate contest, and almost all of it has focused on the implications for health care reform. But it turns out that education policy will likely be affected as well. Brown is a strong advocate of the right of parents to choose their child's school, as are the winners of the gubernatorial elections last November in New Jersey and Virginia. Thus, the three off-year elections collectively represent significant change in the school choice landscape—change that those retooling for the 2010 midterms might want to heed.

New Jersey

In his inaugural address January 19, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie talked about taking a “new direction” to address the “broken schools and broken streets and broken dreams in our cities.” He called for “a new era in which parents have choices,” enabling them to “pursue alternatives to schools that fail.”

During his campaign, Christie never shied away from support for school choice, pledging to create a tuition-tax-credit scholarship program to allow low-income students in failing public schools to attend schools that work, whether public or private.

Once elected, the new governor gave the choice agenda a booster shot when he nominated Bret Schundler, former Jersey City mayor, as education commissioner.

Schundler has a long history of being a strong voice for school choice. “We agree on the type of significant reform that needs to happen in our educational system,”



Senator-elect Scott Brown (R-MA)

Christie said at a news conference in Trenton to introduce Schundler. “I want a strong, reasonable, bold leader who’s going to help me implement those policies.” Calling education “critical to our state’s well-being and economic future,” Christie said the appointment signaled “meaningful change.”

Virginia

Another state that could see some major shifts in education policy is Virginia,

where newly elected Governor Bob McDonnell appointed Gerard Robinson as the commonwealth’s secretary of education. Robinson recently resigned as chief executive of the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO), the nation’s premier advocate for school choice policies that empower black families. Under Robinson’s leadership, BAEO has been a tireless proponent of a panoply of choice measures, including vouchers, tuition tax credits, and the DC scholarship initiative. Its board includes school choice luminaries Virginia Walden Ford, Howard Fuller, and Kevin Chavous, the current chair. Robinson had been BAEO’s president since 2007.

Talking about a particular choice initiative during a meeting in January of the Richmond Crusade for Voters, Virginia’s new education secretary said, “This is not an issue about the right wing or the left wing. It’s about giving our children wings

to fly away from schools that don’t [teach] and land in schools that do,” according to a report in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*.

At a policy forum on school choice last summer at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, Robinson said, “Low income and working class parents...should have the opportunity to choose where to send their children, and if it means using that money for a private school, that’s great.” Addressing the church/state issue, he said vouchers do not advance religion, they advance parental choice, and if a parent happens to use a voucher to choose a religious school, so be it. At the same forum, he responded to critics who oppose vouchers because they only help less than one percent of students. He said he found it interesting that even though other reform efforts—such as magnet schools, Teach for America, and charter schools—all started out helping less than one percent of their respective populations, it’s only vouchers that some shun supposedly because they don’t help the other 99 percent.

In announcing Robinson as his pick for secretary, McDonnell said he could not have selected “a more qualified and dedicated advocate.”

McDonnell himself has taken a hands-on approach to school choice. His campaign Web site noted he “was heavily involved in the effort last spring to save the hundred-year-old Saint Joseph School” in Petersburg, VA. McDonnell “raised money from his supporters and co-workers, and called state press attention to the school. Saving this school was vital to offering families in Petersburg a positive choice for their children to receive a quality education.”

The governor sounded a school choice theme when he delivered the Republican response to President Obama’s State of the Union address January 27: “More school choices for parents and students mean

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CAPE member organizations:

- 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
- 33 Affiliated State Organizations

a coalition of national associations serving private schools K-12
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more accountability and greater achievement. A child’s educational opportunity should be determined by her intellect and work ethic, not by her zip code.”

National Attention

The selection of their education chiefs has gained the two governors some national attention. In an opinion piece January 20, *The Wall Street Journal* offered “kudos” to the two leaders for tapping “strong school choice advocates to head their state education departments.” The paper went on to say, “This is good news for all school children in both states, but it’s especially auspicious for low-income kids stuck in failing schools who have the most to gain from a state education official who is unafraid to shake up the establishment.”

The Alliance for School Choice also praised the two governors and their appointees. Betsy DeVos, chair of the Alliance, said she applauded Bret Schundler’s “renewed commitment to providing all parents and children—especially those from low-income families—with choices so that they’ll have an equal opportunity for a quality education.” She went on to salute Governor Christie “for his outstanding and inspired choice and for his commitment to bold education reform.” In a separate news release, DeVos hailed Governor McDonnell “for his strong commitment to ensuring equal opportunity in education for all children in Virginia.” She called Gerard Robinson “a visionary leader who has demonstrated that he always puts the needs of students and children first,” and she expressed confidence that he “will be a tireless advocate for providing educational opportunities for children from low-income families.”

Massachusetts

Scott Brown’s improbable win in the Sen-

ate race in Massachusetts could bring some changes in policy down the line on the school choice front. During the Senate campaign, Brown emphasized support for charter schools and cross-district public school choice, but in an interview back in 2005, Brown took a more expansive view: “I’ve always felt that school choice is important whether it’s ... charter schools, traditional schools, vouchers, and private schools. Children and parents should have a choice in where they go to school.” And in a Project Vote Smart survey in 2002, Brown registered support for providing parents “with state-funded vouchers to send their children to any participating school (public, private, religious).” Given his history, Brown would seem to be a likely supporter for continuing the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program, should that issue come to the Senate for a vote.



New Jersey Governor Chris Christie

Aside from its impact on school choice, Brown’s victory is already having an effect on broader education legislation. For one, it seems to have altered at least the timetable for the reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA). Back in the fall, the Obama administration was looking to have Congress take up the reauthorization after it approved a health care bill. But in the aftermath of Massachusetts, a fix for health care seems stalled and legislative priorities have undergone an adjustment. In late January, White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel told *The New York Times* that Democrats would next try to work on a jobs bill, deficit reduction, and bank regulation before taking up health care again. That’s an ambitious agenda that doesn’t leave a lot of room for tackling and finishing ESEA before the session ends. Thus, the populist message of Massachusetts seems to be having an effect on Congress’s legislative agenda and may cool any movement toward a large-scale overhaul of ESEA this year.



Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell

Schools Lend Helping Hand to Haiti

“Education is as precious as water in Haiti,” wrote *Washington Post* reporters William Booth and Scott Wilson last month. Of all the losses brought by the earthquake, “few are as threatening to Haiti’s future as the near total destruction of a school system viewed across society here as the only path to a better life.”

Most Haitian schools are private, with international schools and faith-based schools educating 90 percent of students, according to a 2006 report by the Library of Congress. The *Post* reports that after the earthquake, at least 75 percent of schools in Port-au-Prince, the nation’s capital, “lie in ruins.”

Religious and independent schools in the United States and elsewhere are coming to the aid of Haiti, with some employing creative ways to offer assistance.

At Mother McAuley Liberal Arts School in Chicago, IL, students in the Eco Max club have built a solar-powered biodiesel generator for a school in Pichon, Haiti. The project got underway well before the earthquake but has since become all the more pressing. “It’s a really saddening experience. But hopefully when we ship this over, it’ll be of some help to them and they can start over,” junior Ana Vazquez told the local CBS television affiliate.

Rev. Roger Bowen coordinates the Haiti Episcopal Schools Partnership Program, which pairs up communities in the United States and Haiti. Sometimes the partnerships result in a great deal of good stemming from modest efforts. An example from the group’s Web page: “Sixth graders at a small Episcopal school in California have sold bottled water at sporting events in order to raise funds for a clean well for their partner school.”

The North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church has designated February 6 for a special collection for Haiti. According to the SDA community, there are 335,000 Adventist members in Haiti. “We must become the helping hands of family members who care,” says Don Schneider, the division’s president.”

Robert Morris, principal of Ponoka Christian School in Alberta, affiliated with Christian Schools International, reports that after coming up with fundraising ideas at an emergency student council meeting, students at the school

raised \$5,025. “Not bad for a small school of 69 students,” says Morris.

A “change war” at a basketball game between fans of Lutheran High School of St. Charles County, MO, and St. Dominic High School raised more than \$700 to benefit Haiti. The Lutheran school followed up with its own faculty vs. students “change war.”



Small donations can accumulate into huge levels of support. As of January 22, members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) have contributed more than \$1.4 million to recovery efforts in Haiti. The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Committee on Relief

(COR) has also engaged in disaster relief efforts, as has the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s World Relief and Human Care.

The *Hudson Hub-Times* reports that the Hudson Montessori School has launched a project called “Helping Hand for Haiti,” through which students take gloves home and fill them with change. Funds will go to the American Red Cross and the Montessori School in Port-au-Prince.

The Brooklyn Friends School reports that in just one week “the Upper School Peace and Social Action Committee raised \$1,800 for Haitian relief through the sale of pins.” All fundraising efforts at the school will be used to support the work of Doctors Without Borders.

Brian Simmons, president of the Association of Christian Schools International, writes that a large share of students in Haiti attend evangelical Christian schools. Many of those schools have been destroyed, and ACSI is collecting funds for their reconstruction.

Schools in the Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles held a “Hats for Haiti” day during which students donated \$1 in Haitian aid for the privilege of wearing a favorite hat in school.

At The Dwight School in Manhattan, students, faculty, and parents collected more than \$8,500 in one day, with funds being divided between The Clinton Foundation and Angelwish.

Finally, *The New Jersey Jewish News* reports that students at the Joseph Kushner Hebrew Academy/Rae Kushner Yeshiva High School in Livingston packed supplies for Haiti and are holding “A Bag and a Buck” campaign to collect funds and sleeping bags for earthquake victims.

Obama’s SOTU

In his State of the Union address last month, President Obama vowed to work with Congress to expand the principles of his Race to the Top program to all fifty states in order to “improve our schools,” “reward success,” and “invest in reform.” He said, “In the 21st century, one of the best anti-poverty programs is a world-class education.” The president made no mention of support for inner-city religious and independent schools, many of which set the standard for overcoming the effects of poverty with high academic performance and spectacular college-going rates. Race to the Top does not provide for the equitable inclusion of students in such schools.

The president went on to call for tax credits and grants to help families cover the costs of college (whether religious, independent, or public). And to further ease the burden on middle-class families, he said he would seek a doubling of the child-care tax credit, which can currently apply to the costs of religiously affiliated after-school, nursery, and pre-K programs. There was no call, however, for tax credits to help low- and middle-income families who are struggling with the costs of religious and independent elementary and secondary schooling.

Elaborating on the State of the Union and giving a preview of the president’s 2011 budget in an online posting that followed the address, White House Deputy Chief of Staff Mona Sutphen said the budget includes an additional \$1.35 billion to open up the Race to the Top program to individual districts. It also eliminates six education programs while consolidating 38 others “into 11 new programs that emphasize using competition to allocate funds, giving communities more choices around activities, and using rigorous evidence to fund what works.” Competition and choice in education? Great idea!

Return service requested

CAPE notes

★ **Fast Fact About Private Schools:** More than 3,000 students in the District of Columbia have attended religious and independent schools using funds from the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program. Senator Joseph Lieberman (I-CT) and House Republican Leader John Boehner (R-OH) included that fact in a letter they sent to President Obama January 27 urging him to take steps to save the program.

“We ask for your leadership to prevent the termination of the program by including support for a reauthorization of the program, including allowing new students into the program as spaces become available, in your fiscal year 2010 budget,” wrote Boehner and Lieberman. “Terminating the program will be devastating for many low-income families who are zoned for underachieving and often unsafe schools.”

The two lawmakers reminded the president that he once said the standard for supporting a program should be “whether it works.” They noted that the principal investigator for the government-sponsored study of the program found that “the DC voucher program has proven to be the most effective education policy evaluated by the federal government’s official education research arm so far.” Their letter to the president continued, “Using your stated criteria, this program should be reauthorized and additional students should be allowed to participate.”

★ During a Q&A exchange at the Blue

Ribbon Schools awards ceremony last fall, Secretary Duncan demonstrated a keen understanding of the difficulties some private schools face in securing equitable services for students under the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*. A recently released USDE video of the event records Duncan’s response to a question from Steve Char-ton, principal at Solomon Schechter Day School in Raritan Valley, NJ, who talked about federal funds not finding their way to students in private schools and asked if the secretary saw any changes coming. Here’s the secretary’s response:

“It’s a great question and I don’t have an easy answer. When I led an LEA, we had to administer those funds for the Archdiocese of Chicago. And sometimes we did that well, and sometimes we didn’t do that as well, quite frankly. And so I don’t have an easy answer for you today. It is something we’re looking at as we go forward. And what I want to do not just in this situation but more broadly is [figure out]: How do we stop being the bureaucracy? How do we get resources to places that are doing a good job? How do we make that easier? And as we get into the reauthorization and other things, I will tell you that our folks are looking at that. I don’t know what the answer is. But where there are impediments, where there are roadblocks, where the bureaucracy is preventing the money from flowing as quickly or in the right amounts, I commit to you to look at it. I don’t know what the answer is yet, though.”

★ Private Schools with Public Purpose (PSPP) is a consortium established “to encourage and support independent and parochial schools across the nation in more fully leveraging their institutions’ knowledge, networks and resources for the common good.” The consortium is sponsoring a conference in San Francisco from April 22-24. For more information, visit <www.lwhs.org/podium/default.aspx?t=126078&rc=0>.

★ Students at St. Ignatius High School in Cleveland were recognized last month by the Cleveland City Council for launching a movement to counter youth violence. Players on the school’s football team started “Stand Against Violence” after their close friend was viciously beaten by a random group of teens. Students are collecting signatures on a petition urging lawmakers to address the issue. Their Web site is <standagainstvience.org/>.

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