

Council for American Private Education

CAPE outlook

Voice of America's private schools

House Approves Opportunity Scholarships Bill

In a major vote for the school choice movement, the U. S. House of Representatives on March 30 approved a bill to reauthorize the Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) for students in the District of Columbia. Known as the Scholarships for Opportunity and Results (SOAR) Act, the bill, HR 471, would not only continue the program for current participants, but would also allow new students to apply, thereby reversing a decision by Congress in 2009 to phase out the program by closing it to new applicants. The vote, 225 to 195, was largely along party lines.

The measure was championed and sponsored by House Speaker John Boehner (D-OH), a passionate advocate of the program. As a rule, speakers do not sponsor legislation, but this exception reflected Boehner's intense commitment to the issue and his willingness to back up that commitment with political capital. According to Boehner's staff, HR 471 will likely be the only bill he sponsors this year.

During the House floor debate on the measure, Boehner said: "[E]ducation reform starts with giving children in need a way out of our most underachieving public schools." He called scholarship students and their parents "more than just the program's beneficiaries—they are its greatest ambassadors."

White House Position

The day before the vote, the White House said it strongly opposed expanding the program and "opening it to new students." According to the policy statement, the federal government "should focus its attention and available resources on improving the quality of public schools for all students." The statement went on to claim, "Rigorous evaluation over several years demonstrates that the D.C. program has not yielded improved student achievement by its scholarship recipients compared to other students in D.C."

That last statement prompted *The Washington Post* to write the following day in its lead editorial: "The White House of course has a right to its own opinion, as wrongheaded as we believe it to be. It

doesn't have a right to make up facts." The *Post* said the dismissal of student achievement "might come as a surprise to Patrick J. Wolf, the principal investigator

who helped conduct the rigorous studies" of the program. The editorial went on to quote Wolf's testimony February 16 before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Operations: "In my opinion, by demonstrating statistically significant experimental impacts on boosting high school graduation rates and generating a wealth of evidence suggesting that students also benefited in reading achievement, the DC OSP has accomplished what few educational interventions can claim: It markedly improved important education outcomes for low-income inner-city students."

Wolf's study included a finding that the graduation rate for students who used the scholarships to attend private schools was 91 percent—21 points higher than the control group and higher still than the graduation rate for D.C. public schools.

The claim that the program had not produced positive results cropped up several times during the floor debate. In one impassioned intervention, Rep. George Miller (D-CA), ranking member on the House Education and the Workforce Committee, said the program "does not help

the students succeed" and its participants "are not graduating with a set of skills that will allow them to succeed in college or a career," adding that many public schools in the District "are in fact achieving those goals."

The debate generated several spirited exchanges and heartfelt interventions. In fiery rhetoric, Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC) assailed the bill time

and again during the discussion, saying the program is an infringement on D.C. home rule, is not supported by the public, is inconsistent with budget reduction efforts, and has not resulted in improved achievement.

Rep. Trey Gowdy (R-SC) said he respected Delegate Norton's passion and zeal, but "even her passion is no match for the passion of parents who hope for a better future for their children. Even her passion cannot match the passion of the parents who came to testify before our subcommittee that this is a lifeline. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity."

They Got It Right

In an appeal to basic principles, Rep. Rob Bishop (R-UT) said the bill is grounded in the concept of liberty advanced by the nation's founders. "This bill is worthy of our heritage, it is a symbol of our legacy," he said. "One can only assume that the founders, indeed the icons that are looking down from the perch above us, are smiling now saying, 'Congress does not always do it correctly, but this time, with this bill, they got it right.'"



CAPE

CAPE member organizations:

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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
Executive Director: Joe McTigue

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Lawmakers Discuss Key Issues at CAPE Forum

Lawmakers and congressional staff members talked about school choice, the reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA), and other issues during a gathering March 15 of private school leaders sponsored by CAPE. Held in the Cannon Caucus Room on Capitol Hill, the event concluded a three-day celebration of CAPE's 40th anniversary.

Senator Johnny Isakson (R-GA), a member of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee, told the CAPE group that Congress would likely act on the long-overdue reauthorization of ESEA this year, though it would also take steps to address the nation's serious financial problems.

Citing "great appreciation" in Congress for the services that private schools provide students in the Title I program, the senator predicted that the program's provisions relating to the equitable participation of students and teachers in religious and independent schools would likely "remain intact." But while expressing confidence that the private school community could count on funding for equitable participation, Isakson noted that fiscal pressures would probably rule out any dollar amounts beyond current levels.

In a gracious demonstration of Congressional bipartisanship, the senator singled out Rep. Dale Kildee (D-MI) as a long-time champion of equitable services.

Isakson did not rule out the possibility of a limited reauthorization bill to fix the most troubling provisions of ESEA. High on that list are issues surrounding the annual progress in student performance that schools must make. "Because those challenges are imminent and need attention, it may be that if we bog down on the overall reauthorization, there may be a partial reauthorization" to address those specific needs.

Isakson pulled no punches in assessing the nation's fiscal condition and predicted some cuts in education funding, possibly "across the board." He emphasized the value of a quality education for the individual and society, but also stressed the importance of getting the nation's fiscal house in order. Elected officials "are going to have to make some very difficult decisions" and exercise "tough love," he said. "We have to be compassionate in our appropriations but sensible in our expenditures," while "looking at the long run but always keeping in mind what is

best for our children and for their future."

Meeting the Demands of This Century

Rep. George Miller (D-CA), ranking member of the House Education and the Workforce Committee, thanked the CAPE group "for your participation in the national education debate" and said he has seen the benefits of private education within his community and his family.

Delivering an upbeat view of the opportunities for educational improvement provided by the reauthorization of ESEA, Miller argued that a revamped law could "change the relationship between the federal government and local districts" by holding the latter more accountable, not to the U.S. Department of Education, but to parents, students, and communities. "We really now have

an opportunity to design a system of education in this country that really meets the demands of this century," he said.

Miller offered a broad overview of the advantages of new data-collection systems and sophisticated assessment instruments that provide teachers with reliable feedback in real time on the progress and instructional needs of students. He also defended the disaggregated data provisions of the *No Child Left Behind Act* as providing a truer picture of how all students in a school are doing, preventing schools from hiding particular groups of poor-performing students within overall scores. Still, he wants the law to change so that the growth—sometimes dramatic growth—that schools and teachers bring about in students is recognized.

Noting that some private schools "play a very important role as models for success," Miller said he would like to see "greater cooperation and involvement" between private schools and public schools.

In response to a question, Miller said he hoped the specific funding for technology initiatives that currently exists in ESEA would be retained and increased. And to another questioner, he affirmed that he and his staff take "very seriously" the concerns from the private school community that resources for equitable services are being diverted through off-the-top allocations under Title I, noting that private schools "are an educational resource in our community and the country."



Sen. Johnny Isakson (R-GA)



Rep. George Miller (D-CA)

When he was a public school teacher in Utah, a job he held from 1974 to 2002, Rep. Rob Bishop (R-UT) fought for school vouchers because, as he told the CAPE group, “there are a lot of kids who do not get the education they need in the public sector” and parents need to have choice. Besides, “there is nothing that public education has to fear from the private sector.” That philosophy helps explain his cosponsorship of HR 471, the Scholarships for Opportunity and Results (SOAR) Act.

Believing that the free market and competition are the best drivers of reform, Bishop said it’s time for government to try something new. “We’ve tried rules; we have tried regulations; we have tried financially bribing in education,” he observed, but “the one concept that Congress and the government have never tried when it comes to education is the concept of freedom.” Giving parents freedom would promote high standards and improve outcomes. If we really want to improve education in the United States, “simply for once try to allow freedom.” Bishop believes that the creative energy generated by school choice would “produce a higher standard than any predisposed standardized curriculum.”

As for those who say parents don’t know what is best for their children, Bishop has a one-word response: “Hogwash.”

A member of the House Rules Committee, Bishop is not a fan of “spending a whole lot of money and trying some top-down regulations” as a way to improve education. “Every time we’ve tried that...it doesn’t work,” he said. He reserved particular concern about attempts to standardize the curriculum. Math may be the same in Massachusetts and Mississippi, he said, “but the kids are not.” Standardization suggests that “kids are widgets” who can be put on a curriculum conveyor belt that produces the same product. But “every kid is different,” he said.

Two weeks after the CAPE event, Rep. Bishop represented the majority in leading and managing the House floor discussion of the rule governing consideration of the SOAR Act.

Increase Quality, Decrease Costs

Rep. Glenn Thompson (R-PA), a member of the House Education and the Workforce Committee and another cosponsor of the SOAR Act, continued the theme of choice and competition in education. “When we have competition, we

normally increase quality and decrease costs,” he said, noting that there are many ways and opportunities to educate children and that he supports public education as well as private education. “To me it’s not about where a child is educated,” he said, “it’s about the fact that we are educating children.”

Expressing concerns about the *No Child Left Behind Act*, Thompson, a former school board member, said the law “focuses on preparing children to do tremendously well on specific test questions,” but education should be more than that, readying children to meet their potential and excel.

He also faulted the act for presuming every child should go to college. Thompson is a champion of career education and technical training to help some youngsters enter the workforce, and he also supports alternative paths to college, such as service in the military.

Thompson told the group that the experts in education do not necessarily reside in Washington, but are the parents, teachers, administrators, and local board members who help children reach their individual potential.

Host of Issues

Other presenters at the CAPE event delivered updates on a host of issues. John Schilling, chief operating officer at the American Federation for Children offered an up-to-the-minute overview of school choice initiatives across the nation. Mark Laisch, professional staff member for the majority on the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies, provided a comprehensive picture of the current status of the ongoing appropriations process for fiscal year 2011.

Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, reported on research surrounding the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program and shared concerns regarding the common curriculum standards movement. Katherine Haley, education policy advisor to House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH), provided a status update on the SOAR Act and the reauthorization of ESEA. And closing out the program, Dr. Spiros Protopsaltis, education policy advisor to Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), who chairs the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, reviewed Harkin’s priority issues and ambitious timeline for the reauthorization of ESEA.



Rep. Rob Bishop (R-UT)



Rep. Glenn Thompson (R-PA)

Digital Now

Providing the CAPE board and state CAPE representatives a fascinating peek into the future of education, Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia, reviewed a new document from the Digital Learning Council, which he co-chairs with Jeb Bush, former governor of Florida.

The council’s “Ten Elements of High Quality Digital Learning” calls for universal access to digital instruction. Its first principle relates to student eligibility, and the vision is broad: “All students are digital learners.” States should ensure “access to high quality digital content and online courses to all students,” regardless of the type of school the student attends.

Other principles relate to personalized learning (the ability to customize instruction), advancement (progress based on competency), high quality content and instruction, multiple providers, funding, and accountability.

Wise made the case for digital learning as a way to help deal with declining state revenues, a growing teacher shortage, and worldwide demands for skilled workers. Regarding revenues, he explained that in FY 2010, “39 states made mid-year budget cuts totaling \$18.3 billion.” What’s more, “35 of those states cut K-12 education.” He graphically illustrated the teacher shortage with data from one state that has 440 high schools but only 88 qualified physics teachers. And despite the demand for a highly skilled workforce, Wise reported that in the United States, “Three out of every ten students do not graduate from high school.” Moreover, “About half of those who graduate are not college- and work-ready.”

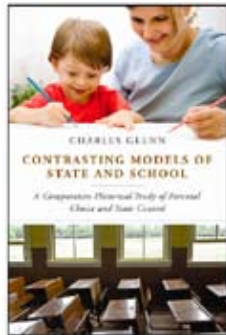
He challenged the group to “be boldly innovative, or be badly irrelevant.”

“Ten Elements of High Quality Digital Learning” is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/>.

Return service requested

CAPE notes

★ CAPE board member Charles L. Glenn, professor of educational leadership and development at Boston University, has just released his ninth book, *Contrasting Models of State and School: A Comparative Historical Study of Parental Choice and State Control*. A solid read for anyone interested in public policy issues surrounding parental choice, school autonomy, and government control of education, the book examines two countries that accomplish schooling largely through parental choice and non-government institutions (The Netherlands and Belgium) and two that do so predominantly through state control (Germany and Austria). Glenn examines the historical roots, differences, and implications of each.



★ The issue of whether to give primacy over education to parents or the state is also covered in a clear, concise, and convincing new booklet from the Family Research Council. *Who Should Decide How Children Are Educated?* is written by Jack Klenk, who worked for 27 years at the U.S. Department of Education, most recently as director of the Office of Non-Public Education.

Klenk contends that control of a child's schooling is a "fundamental question about education policy that faces the United States as it attempts to build educational institutions for the twenty-first century."

He tackles the flawed assumption that "the school is an agent of the state rather than an extension of the family" and questions why some would deny public funding for alternative schooling. Exploring the history of the common school movement in the United States, including "the attempt to compel parents to send their children exclusively to public schools," Klenk challenges the belief that "the public school system is an engine of progress and enlightenment whose schools, and only its schools, should receive public funding."

He concludes that if education is to be "authentically public, it must serve all parents without discrimination, parents from the whole public, not just those whose children attend one category of schools." That involves giving parents "access to a variety of schools, not just government schools." He urges everyone who is concerned about education "to think creatively and act courageously to empower parents to become more actively involved in the education of their children." It starts, he says, "with a determination to put parents first."

The booklet is available at <www.frc.org/>.

★ New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan and New York Governor Andrew Cuomo apparently had a promising exchange about Catholic schools during a

meeting in March. According to the Associated Press, Dolan described it this way: "I said, 'Look, you all tell us in the government that you want quality education, you need to save money, and you need more room. We can help you in all three: We do the best job around, we'll do it at half the price and we got room. It's a no-brainer. Can't we cooperate?' He said, 'Yeah, let's do it.'"

★ A new report by the Foundation for Educational Choice reviews 10 "gold standard" studies of school voucher programs and finds that nine of them demonstrate higher academic performance for students who use them. Greg Forster, a senior fellow with The Foundation, also reviewed 19 studies on the effect of vouchers on public schools and found that 18 of those studies showed that the voucher programs improved public schools. *A Win-Win Solution* is available at <www.edchoice.org/>.

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