

Council for American Private Education

# CAPE outlook

Voice of America's private schools

## Duncan Discusses School Safety with Private School Officials

Education Secretary Arne Duncan sent a strong message to the private school community that the Obama administration is committed to keeping all students safe, no matter what type of school they attend.

In a historic 30-minute conference call February 12 with private school leaders from across the country, Duncan and Education Department staff described a far-reaching federal plan to bolster student safety—a plan prompted by the slaughter of students at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, this past December.

“We want to do everything we can to make our schools absolutely as safe as possible,” Duncan said, noting that “having fewer children being shot and fewer children living in fear... are goals we can all agree on.”

Duncan said the administration is convinced that “a comprehensive approach” to student safety is warranted, involving components that address community violence, mental health, video games, movies, high-capacity guns, and background checks.

Regarding the community component, the secretary said, “We have to do whatever we can to reduce violence in our children’s communities, where the vast majority of these tragedies happen.” Schools, themselves, he said, “are generally the safest places our kids are at.”

Duncan invited feedback and ideas from the private school community, saying, “Collectively, we can do everything we can to make sure that kids across the country have a chance to live in communities and go to schools in environments where they’re not scared.”

### Four Buckets

David Esquith, director of the Office of Safe and Healthy Students, described the

“four education-related buckets” found in *Now Is the Time*, President Obama’s plan to reduce gun violence. He said the proposal is designed (1) “to ensure that every school



U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan testifies before the Senate Appropriations Committee February 14, 2013.

(image from Senate video)

has a comprehensive emergency management plan,” (2) “to create safe and positive school climates in schools across the country,” (3) “to make sure students and young adults get treatment for mental health issues,” and (4) “to ensure that schools are safe.”

On the issue of emergency management plans, Esquith said the department will offer guidance on developing and implementing such plans and will also provide schools with examples and best practices.

He said the president’s plan calls for the department to assist 8,000 schools to “create safer and more nurturing school climates.” The department will also serve as a resource to help schools share best practices on school discipline, address pervasive violence, and collect reliable school climate data.

The mental health component of the plan “provides for reaching 750,000 young people through programs to identify mental illness early and refer them to treatment.” Teachers will be offered “Mental

Health First Aid” training, and students who show signs of mental illness will be steered to the care they need. Support will also be provided for persons between ages 16 and 24 who are “at high risk for mental illness.” The plan also calls for training “more than 5,000 additional mental health professionals to serve students and young adults.”

As for the fourth bucket—ensuring that schools are safe—Esquith said the proposal involves “putting up to 1,000 more school resource officers and counselors in schools.” It will also help schools purchase safety equipment and train crisis-intervention teams. Districts will be free to “choose what type of support they need.”

### Equitable Services

Asked whether the school-related components of the president’s plan will require that all students, including those in religious and independent schools, receive equitable services, Esquith said that any activities carried out under Title IV of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* will be governed by the title’s existing requirements for equitability. He added that officials at the Department of Justice have offered assurance that funds awarded for hiring school resource officers under the Community Oriented Policing Services program will also include provisions for equitable services. As for programs still on the drawing board, Esquith said department officials “are interested in making sure that all students are safe in all schools and will do everything we can to follow through on that.” Later in the call, Esquith said, “I can assure you that all of the model resources and training and best practices that we are developing will be available to everyone.”

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# Rubio Puts Forth Bold School Choice Plan

# CAPE

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  
Executive Director: Joe McTigue

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Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) introduced his first bill of the 113th Congress last month, and it set the school choice community abuzz. The Educational Opportunities Act (S. 297) would establish for the first time at the federal level a tax credit scholarship program similar to those that currently exist in 11 states.

To be sure, the measure faces a steep uphill climb in the Senate. Nevertheless, its introduction by a rising Republican is an important indicator of how far this concept has progressed.

“Education plays a central role in the 21st century knowledge economy,” said Senator Rubio. “If we want our children to thrive economically, we need to equip students and families with the tools they need to succeed and make it in the middle class and beyond. Parental school choice is a critical piece in this, which is why I introduced the Educational Opportunities Act.”

Rubio called the measure “the kind of incentive that will help improve education in America and prepare our children for the jobs of tomorrow, without additional burdens on the American taxpayer.”

The bill would allow a corporate and individual tax credit for contributions to nonprofit programs that grant scholarships to cover expenses associated with attending a religious or independent school. Scholarships would be available to students currently enrolled in public or private schools who come from families with an annual household income not greater than 250 percent

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Responding to a participant who asked whether the president’s program would cover external threats to schools from religious or political extremists, Esquith said that all the elements of the plan that address violence “would encompass the types of insidious violence that you have alluded to.”

In response to several other questions, Esquith addressed the reporting requirements associated with the plan, emphasized the importance of community service by students, referred participants to emergency management resources already posted on the department’s Web site

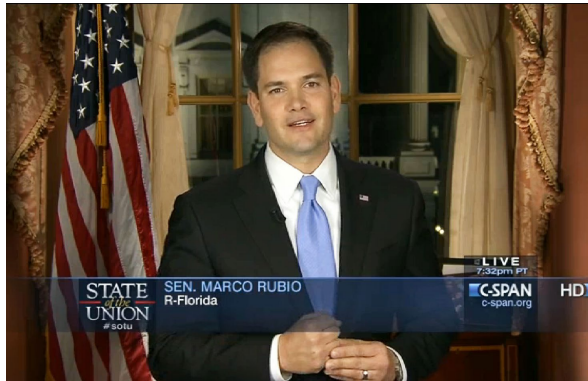
of the federal poverty guidelines.

Participating schools would be required to report to scholarship organizations the results of scholarship students on national standardized tests or state-recognized assessments.

## Swift and Positive Reaction

Reaction to the bill from school choice advocates was swift and positive.

Julio Fuentes, president of Hispanic Council For Reform and Educational Options, said the bill would “move the country a long way towards leveling the playing field for Hispanic students and families.” He went on to say, “A federal tax credit scholarship program will give students around the nation more options to excel, regardless of their ZIP code or their socioeconomic



Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL) delivers the GOP address to the nation Feb. 12, 2013. (image from C-SPAN video)

background.”

Rabbi David Zwiebel, Esq., executive vice president of Agudath Israel of America, said, “Jewish day school families, among many others, will be able to use this scholarship program to better give their children the access they deserve to a high quality education. Our children, our communities, our democracy, and our nation will all be the better for it.”

Kevin P. Chavous, executive counsel for the American Federation for Children, said that “tragically high” dropout rates and the reality of children remaining “trapped in traditional schools that do not work” require “the courage to put all options on the table—options we know work for disadvantaged kids.”

(rems.ed.gov), and said department officials would “welcome a dialogue between private and public schools on best practices.”

## Call to Action

Noting that the administration’s proposals have to be approved by Congress, Secretary Duncan called on the private school community to urge Congress to approve the measures. “So whatever you guys can do, individually and collectively, to have your voices heard in a bipartisan way across the country that our schools and our children need these kinds of resources, I can’t overstate how important that is.”

## President Proposes Expansion of Public Preschool Programs

President Barack Obama used his State of the Union address last month to unveil a comprehensive initiative to expand public preschool programs across the nation. Saying that “lack of access to preschool education can shadow [low-income children] for the rest of their lives,” the president proposed “working with states to make high-quality preschool available to every single child in America.”

A White House **fact sheet** said the proposal “will improve quality and expand access to preschool through a cost-sharing partnership with all 50 states.” Specifically, the initiative will “extend federal funds to expand high-quality public preschool to reach all low- and moderate-income four-year-olds from families at or below 200% of poverty.”

The proposal will also “include an incentive for states to broaden participation in their public preschool programs for additional middle-class families, which states may choose to reach and serve in a variety of ways, such as a sliding-scale arrangement.”

Provisions will ensure “high-quality programs,” involving “common and consistent standards.” Such standards will cover: “well-trained teachers, who are paid comparably to K-12 staff; small class sizes and low adult-to-child ratios; a rigorous curriculum; comprehensive health and related services; and effective evaluation.”

### Choice and Pluralism

The proposal’s focus on government preschool programs has sparked concern within the private school community.

An **issue paper on preschool**, approved in 2008 by CAPE’s board of directors, calls for choice and pluralism in pre-K programs. Citing the right of parents “to decide how their children will be educated,” the paper states, “Government should never insist that all children receive the same education in government-run institutions. Instead, public policy should support the right of parents—the people who love the child most and know the child best—to direct the child’s formative years.” The paper goes on to note, “In a free society, it is essential that parents be able to choose from an array of op-

tions. Without options, there is no choice; and without choice, there is no freedom.”

To uphold “freedom of choice in early childhood education,” CAPE’s board offered several principles relating to early education:

- Formal early childhood education should be voluntary.
- Legislation promoting early childhood education should support the right of parents to choose from a range of programs and providers without financial penalty.

Programs designed to assist children and teachers should provide benefits to comparably situated children and teachers, whether in independent or government-run settings.

• Early childhood education regulations should not seek program uniformity; they should promote pluralism that allows institutions to fulfill their unique missions and parents to choose from a variety of truly distinctive options.

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### Letter to President

In a letter to President Obama, Agudath Israel of American, a member of CAPE, said that pre-K initiatives should make available to families “every existing and workable preschool opportunity—including programs that are operated by religious providers.” Noting that religious entities constitute a large share of current providers, the letter states, “it is simply inconceivable to think that meaningful movement forward in universal pre-K can come about without including the faith-based sector.”

### Fate Uncertain

The fate of the president’s proposal in Congress seems uncertain. In a statement of response, House Committee on Education and the Workforce Chairman John Kline (R-MN) wondered whether the plan would be duplicative, effective, and affordable. “We all want to give children a solid foundation for a bright future, but that also means we can’t saddle them with even more debt.” Kline expressed confidence that an approach to early education could be found that would “promote parental choice” and “ensure an appropriate federal role in education.”



President Barack Obama greets Vice President Joe Biden and House Speaker John Boehner before delivering the State of the Union address Feb. 12, 2013. (official White House photo by Pete Souza)

## Distinctive Traits

Sometimes it takes an outsider to point out the obvious. A recent commentary in *Education Week* by Alan C. Jones crisply captures clear distinctions between private schools and public schools.

Jones recently embarked on a quest for the right public school for his grandson. The search proved gloomy. Over the course of several weeks, he “reviewed curriculum with no art or music,” “found kindergarten programs with no recess,” and “observed classrooms where students were required to repeat state standards written on the chalkboard.” Other class sessions involved “timed tests, test-preparation games, and the distribution of awards for those who met the state standard for the day.”

Conversations with teachers and administrators were punctuated by “pseudo-educational jargon” and “business metaphors” but no “sensitivity to the developmental needs of a kindergartner.”

The misadventures got Jones thinking about Sidwell Friends School. By visiting the school’s Web site, he found that Sidwell’s students “experienced an instructional program that allocated appropriate time for each discipline to be taught well; engaged in instructional activities that were problem-based and interdisciplinary; participated in a rich extra-curricular program; and were supervised by administrators and teachers who place children’s social and emotional development on an equal footing with their intellectual growth.” Strikingly, he saw “no mention of test scores, adequate yearly progress, or data-driven instruction.”

His conclusion? The “government-driven regime of testing and accountability” is not good for students. It breeds schools “more interested in reaching some number at the end of the school year than with my grandson’s deep—and untestable—need to be known, respected, and educated.”

Return service requested

## CAPE notes

★ February was an unforgettable month for two fourth-graders from Washington who participate in the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP).

Laci Joseph and Zuri Franklin were the honored guests of House Speaker John Boehner at President Obama's State of the Union address February 12. The students from St. Anthony Catholic School also appeared on NBC's Today program, where Matt Lauer interviewed them and Speaker Boehner.

Asked what he wanted Laci and Zuri to take away from the experience, Boehner said, "I want them to believe that they can live the American Dream and grow up to be anything they want to be."

★ Aside from the obvious benefits to individual students like Laci and Zuri, the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) also carries advantages to society at large. According to a study published in *Education Finance and Policy*, a peer-reviewed academic journal, every dollar spent on the OSP yields \$2.62 in benefits.

The study's authors—Patrick J. Wolf, professor of education reform at the Uni-

versity of Arkansas in Fayetteville, and Michael Q. McShane, research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute—calculated the benefit based on a finding from an



Speaker John Boehner high-fives Zuri Franklin as Laci Joseph looks on in his office at the U.S. Capitol. (Office of the Speaker photo by Heather Reed)

earlier evaluation of the program sponsored by the federal government. The fed study showed that scholarship students graduated from high school at a rate 12 percentage points higher than students in a control group. Using sophisticated cost/benefit formulas, Wolf and McShane estimated that the higher graduation rates will eventually provide society a pay-off equal to between two and three times the program's cost.

★ In a **ruling** February 28, the Colorado Court of Appeals upheld the innovative Douglas County School District's Choice Scholarship Program (CSP), reversing a lower court ruling that had enjoined the program's implementation. The appeals court found that the CSP "does not violate any of the constitutional provisions on which plaintiffs rely."

"This is an enormous victory not just for Douglas County families, but for all

Colorado families who simply want the right to choose the schools that are best for their kids," said Michael Bindas, a senior attorney with the Institute for Justice, which defended the program.

Established by the district in 2011, the CSP provides up to 500 scholarships to public school students who want to attend private schools.

★ The Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI), a member of CAPE, joined a **friend-of-the-court brief** last month to challenge the religious freedom restrictions of the HHS Mandate.

The brief, prepared by the Christian Legal Society (CLS), argues that the mandate "departs from the nation's bipartisan tradition of respect for religious liberty."

One issue the brief challenges is the mandate's definition of "religious employer," a definition the brief describes as "grossly inadequate to protect meaningful religious liberty." Even the amendment offered by HHS in early February "would protect only religious ministries that are integrated auxiliaries of a church," leaving out, for example, an independent religious school not directly controlled by a church.

Commenting on the case, P. George Tryfiates, ACSI's director for government affairs, said, "The right to free exercise of religion is our first freedom. The government's mandate is a serious imposition on that freedom..."

The case is currently before the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals.