

Council for American Private Education

CAPE outlook

Voice of America's private schools

Early Education Policy Poses Key Question for Legislators

Pre-K by conscription or choice? That's how John Coons, professor of law, emeritus, at the University of California at Berkeley, frames a central question in the current debate about early education policy. Will parents be told by the government where to enroll their four-year-olds, or will they have a genuine choice of providers? The question, writes Coons in a recent *essay*, dates back at least to Plato, who thought newborns in his ideal city should be stripped from their parents and subjected to the full-time care of specialists.

Coons reminds us that when it comes to post-K education in the United States, wealthy families get to select their child's school, but "for the less fortunate family, it is difficult or impossible to avoid their child's conscription for seven hours, five days a week" in a school designated by the government.

Policymakers now have to decide the extent to which the Platonic vision will influence pre-K policy, he writes. Will "lower-income families be subsidized in order to make their own choices among public, private, and religious providers"? Or will "pre-K school be designed as the government strong-arm long familiar to post-K families, especially those forced into public schools in the cities"?

Early Ed Hearings

The issue is currently playing out in the U.S. Congress, where, in early February, committees in both the Senate and House held hearings on early education.

The House Education and the Workforce Committee, chaired by Rep. John Kline (R-MN), considered a host of issues surrounding early education on February 5. The committee may take up legislation to reauthorize the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) program, which, since the 1990s, has helped parents pay for the child-care setting of their choice—public, private, or religious.

The Senate is slated to take up the reauthorization in early March. By providing assistance directly to parents in the form of certificates, and allowing parents to determine where those certificates are used, the program enables faith-based providers to retain their religious dimension, much as vouchers do at the K-12 level.

Chairman Kline said his committee will continue to discuss early childhood programs, such as Head Start and CCDBG, and will "focus on exploring opportunities to strengthen the programs through enhanced coordination and transparency." He also said the committee will take steps "to ensure the programs prioritize serving children and families most in need."

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Capitol, Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) on February 6 chaired what he described as the first in a series of Senate HELP Committee hearings on early learning. He pledged that the committee would take up his *Strong Start for America's Children Act* before the Memorial Day recess. The bill, modeled after a framework advanced by President Obama, is designed to expand access to early learning programs, but does so by funneling federal funds to states, which then channel them directly to local child-care entities. Because of constitutional prohibitions, such direct funding in effect eliminates participation by faith-based providers that incorporate religious components within their programs.

But it's not just a proposal's overall

architecture that can constrict parental choice; sometimes its details narrow the options as well. For example, when a statute prescribes that certain components—

such as curriculum, staff credentials, performance standards, pedagogy, and professional development—meet a narrow set of "quality" controls, some respected and successful approaches that have a different and time-honored take on child development, such as Montessori or Waldorf programs, can easily be excluded.

Choice Amendment

At his hearing on early learning, Senator Harkin confessed, "I just personally happen to be a big fan of the Montessori method." He said he had even considered an incentive in his bill for providers who incor-

porate a Montessori approach. Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN), the committee's ranking member, suggested lightheartedly that such a provision be called the "Harkin School Choice Amendment."

Children Differ

An issue paper on early childhood development approved by CAPE's board of directors states, "Neither the hard sciences nor the social sciences tell us what type or combination of activities, lessons, and methods are best suited for all children in all circumstances or even for particular children in particular circumstances.... It is the responsibility and right of parents, the child's primary educators, to rely on love,



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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
- Council on Educational Standards and Accountability
- 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
- 35 Affiliated State Organizations

a coalition of national associations serving private schools K-12
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Indiana Considers Early Education Scholarships

Federal and state lawmakers looking for a road map for advancing early education while preserving parental choice might consider a proposal that has gained some ground in Indiana.

In his State of the Union address January 14, Governor Mike Pence announced support for a pre-K program that meets certain key criteria. “It’s important that the program be voluntary. It’s important that the program is available in the form of a voucher,” the governor said. “I want parents to be able to choose to send their child to a church-based program, a private program, or a public program that they think would best meet their needs.”

On February 12, Pence reinforced his position by delivering testimony before the Indiana Senate Education and Career Development Committee in support of House Bill 1004, which would establish a pilot voucher program to allow low-income children to attend a pre-K program of their parents’ choice. It was the first time Pence had ever testified in support of a bill as governor.

“Reducing childhood poverty is a goal of our administration,” said Pence. “I have come to the conclusion that we will not succeed in this fight if we do not honestly deal with the fact that too many children do not do well in school because they simply aren’t ready to learn.”

Saying the best pre-K program is a family providing “the enrichment at home that every child needs and deserves,” Pence noted that many disadvantaged children “simply don’t have the basic knowledge or skills they need” when they arrive at school. “I find that not only unacceptable, but heartbreaking,” he said.

The state, said Pence, is “indeed fortunate to have a broad range of public, faith-based and other private programs, all of which should be a part of our efforts to help give these children a better shot at success.”

HB 1004, which the Indiana House overwhelmingly approved in January by a vote of 87 to 9, would establish a pilot program for 1,000 four-year-olds in the state who come from families with an annual household income up to 185 percent of the federal poverty line. Scholarships would be worth up to \$6,800 for children in a full-time program and \$3,400 for those in a half-

day program, and could be used in a variety of pre-K settings, including faith-based programs and those that reflect a particular pedagogy, such as Montessori or Waldorf programs.

An attractive feature of the bill is that its quality assurance provisions are not excessively prescriptive, thus allowing diverse types of pre-K programs to participate. To be eligible to receive scholarship students, providers must either achieve a certain performance level through the state’s Child Care Quality Rating and Improvement System or be nationally accredited by a state-recognized accrediting body. Centers operated by state-accredited schools are also eligible. Providers must also administer a state-approved kindergarten readiness assessment.

John Elcesser, executive director of the state’s CAPE affiliate, the Indiana Non-Public Education Association, said INPEA supports the bill

because it increases access to quality early education programs for lower income families, involves both public and private providers, and “is voluntary for families while providing choice.”

Brookings Proposal

In testimony February 5 at a hearing on early childhood education before the Education and the Workforce Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives, Grover J. “Russ” Whitehurst, director of the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution, offered a federal-level policy initiative that could have been the prototype for the Indiana proposal. He called for funds targeted to “families that cannot otherwise afford childcare” and suggested a design that ensures quality without mandating the specific characteristics that early childhood settings should have. But the heart of Whitehurst’s proposal is that assistance should be provided to parents “in the form of a means-tested voucher that the family carries with them to the state-licensed childcare provider of their choice.” He compared the proposal, which he calls the Early Learning Family (ELF) grant, to “the federal Pell grant system, which supports the college tuition costs of low-income students.”

Whitehurst challenged lawmakers to “place the financial resources to purchase early learning and care directly in the hands of families.”



Indiana Governor Mike Pence delivers his State of the Union address January 14, 2014.

Mississippi Moves Toward Education Savings Accounts

Mississippi took a major leap in February toward becoming the second state to establish an Education Savings Account (ESA) program that puts parents in charge of their children's education and provides an array of choices for carrying out that responsibility. Arizona already has an ESA program.

The state's House and Senate approved the Equal Opportunity for All Students with Special Needs Act (SB 2325 and HB 765), geared toward helping students who have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or an accommodation under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. To be eligible for an ESA, students must have attended a public school in the state the previous year or must be attending any primary or secondary school in the state for the first time.

Parents of such students would receive a deposit each year in an Individualized Education Fund (IEF) equal to the Mississippi Adequate Education Program amount plus an add-on allowance based on state categorical aid programs. The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice estimates the total annual amount would be roughly \$6,100. Parents could use those funds for tuition and fees at private schools, enrolling in an online learning program, hiring an accredited tutor, purchasing services from a public school, covering the costs of instructional equipment and materials, and a host of other educational options. Any monies left over in an IEF after the student graduates from high school could be used for postsecondary expenses.

The bill requires a legislative committee to report every two years on the degree of students' and parents' satisfaction with the program, student performance on nationally standardized tests and college admission tests, high school

graduation rates, and other measures of the program's effectiveness.

Participating private schools must comply with applicable health and safety laws, must offer participating students the opportunity to take a nationally standardized achievement test, must certify that they comply with federal non-discrimination laws, and must conduct criminal background checks on employees.

Autonomy of Schools

The bill makes clear that participating private schools are autonomous and are not agents of the government. It goes on to state, "The department or any other state agency may not in any way regulate the educational program of a participating nonpublic school or education provider that accepts funds from the parent of a participating student." Further, "Participating nonpublic schools and education providers shall be given the maximum freedom to provide for the educational needs of their students without governmental control."

The bills approved by the House and Senate differ slightly from one another and require reconciliation followed by final passage of the identical version by both chambers. After that, the bill goes to Governor Phil Bryant for signature and enactment.

Preliminary action by the Mississippi legislature drew swift praise from Kevin Chavous, executive counsel to the American Federation for Children. "Mississippi is on the verge of breaking down a major barrier and empowering parents who deserve every available option for their children," said Chavous. "As we've witnessed in Arizona, ESAs can transform the lives of children, especially children who need unique attention for their special needs."

regardless of the learning style of their child."

As CAPE's paper puts it, "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 say, "In a free society, it is essential that parents be able to choose from an array of options. Without options, there is no choice; and without choice, there is no freedom."



Film Fest

President Obama on February 27 announced the 16 official selections from the first-ever [White House Student Film Festival](#), described in a White House news release (the source for all quotes in this article unless otherwise noted) as a video competition to encourage K-12 students "to create short films on how technology is used in their classroom." Over 2,000 videos were submitted for consideration, and at least five of the 16 selections came from students in private schools.

In his winning film, "Technology in Education: A Future Classroom," Daniel Nemroff, a junior at Friends Central School in Wynnewood, PA, "replaces standard texting with a conceptual example of Objective-Based Learning."

Eleventh-grader Aaron Buangsuwon, from Polytechnic School in Pasadena, CA, used his entry, "Alex," to explain "how technology is helping kids with dyslexia and/or dysgraphia learn in a modern school environment."

Kira Bursky, 17, a student at Interlochen Arts Academy in Michigan, won for "Hello From Malaysia," which "chronicles a fictional girl, Aiman," who uses technology "to maintain a connection with her family back home in Malaysia."

Seventh-graders Marni Rosenblatt, Justin Etzine, and Rachel Huss at the David Posnack Jewish Day School in Davie, FL, "tell the story of fellow student Kyle Weintraub, who is being treated for lymphoma in Philadelphia but continues to attend school...through the use of a special robot."

And Alexander Emerson, who graduated last June as an eighth-grader from the Brookwood School in Manchester, MA, used his film "Tomorrow's Classroom" to highlight the school's "cook-stove" curriculum. A school news release says the film, "illuminates the importance of global education, and the ways in which students can learn from one another...to creatively solve problems."

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instinct, values, and observation to determine the setting and style of early instruction that meets their children's needs."

That sentiment was echoed in Senate testimony by Ms. Danielle Ewen, director of the Office of Early Childhood Education for the District of Columbia, when she said, "Different children develop in different ways, and different families have different preferences." She added, "I think it's really important that we have a variety of environments that every family can choose from

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CAPE notes

★ There's probably no single foolproof formula for launching a viral video, but administrators at Durham Academy certainly came across one way when they took an imaginative approach to announcing the school's cancellation February 13 due to rare icy weather.

"All right stop. Collaborate and listen. Ice is back and the roads will glisten," rapped Head of School Michael Ulku-Steiner and Assistant Head Lee Hark. "Sleet falling down like a million missiles, bringing school delays and early dismissals," the duo continued to the beat of "Ice Ice Baby," a classic 90's hip-hop song by rapper Vanilla Ice.

TV programs, newscasts, and online sites across the world quickly featured the North Carolina school's red hot video, and all that publicity soon translated into millions of YouTube views.

Check it out at <http://www.da.org/podium/default.aspx?t=204&cnid=902414> and get ready to groove.

★ When the Michigan Supreme Court hears oral arguments March 6 in a case involving the status of prison inmates who had been sentenced as juveniles to life without parole, part of its record will be an amicus brief written by a private school student and filed on behalf of 450 students

in her school. The court recently accepted the 18-page brief of 16-year-old Matilyn Sarosi, a student at Father Gabriel Richard Catholic High School in Ann Arbor.

The U.S. Supreme Court has already determined that mandatory life sentences without parole for juveniles is cruel and unusual punishment, but it is unclear whether that ruling applies retroactively to inmates already serving time.

Sarosi argues in her brief that it should: "The 350+ people serving a sentence that the United

States Supreme Court has said is unconstitutional were children when they were convicted. None of them received an individual review before they were given a life without parole sentence.... How is it just to continue a practice in Michigan that has been ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court?"

★ What do you get when you mix the pedagogy of Maria Montessori with the teachings of Judaism? An engaging article last month in *The New York Times* focused on answering that question by exploring what it described as a "surge in popularity" of Montessori education among Jewish parents.

The piece describes one classroom at Lamplighters Yeshivah in the Crown

Heights section of Brooklyn, where "Montessori number-counting boards and decimal beads share space with Hebrew-learning materials."

According to the article, "In Brooklyn, whose more than 600,000 Jews include secular Jews in brownstone Brooklyn and Hasidic Jews in Borough Park and Williamsburg, four Montessori schools have opened in the last decade."

But the growth is not limited to Brooklyn: "In Boca Raton, Fla., there are centrist Orthodox, Chabad Orthodox, Reform and Conservative Montessori preschools; Orthodox day schools have started Montessori programs in Houston and Cincinnati; and several New Jersey towns with large Jewish populations now have Montessori schools."

Ami Petter-Lipstein, director of the Jewish Montessori Society, told the Times her group knows of 40 Jewish Montessori schools in North America and roughly 30 in Israel.



Durham Academy administrators rapping away in their viral video.

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