

cape Council for American Private Education outlook

"Voice of the Nation's Private Schools"

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Technology Double-Header NCES Survey & FCC Telecom Plan

It was a wham-bam week of big-time technology news for private schools. On Monday, May 5, the National Center for Education Statistics released its overdue report on *Advanced Telecommunications Services in U.S. Private Schools*. The survey showed private schools to be on the "have-not" side of the digital divide, substantially behind public schools in Internet access and classroom connectivity. Two days later, the Federal Communications Commission approved a much-anticipated plan to provide up to \$2.25 billion in annual discounts to help schools enter the Information Age. For a good portion of the nation's schools, the plan delivers on its promise to provide "affordable access to modern telecommunications and information services."

The FCC ruling, which implements certain provisions of the *Telecommunications Act of 1996*, provides discounts of 20 to 90 percent "on all telecommunications services, Internet access, and internal connections." The U.S. Department of Education estimates that nearly half the country's public schools will receive discounts of 60 percent or more.

A Department estimate of how private schools will fare under the FCC plan is not available.

Just how high a discount a school gets depends on how economically needy the school is. The FCC decided to measure a school's need by measuring the poverty level of the school's students. In turn, the poverty level of students is measured by their eligibility for participation in the national school lunch program. So, the discount formula turns out to be fairly straightforward:

School Telecom Discount - Based on % of a School's Students Eligible for National Lunch Program			
% of Students Eligible	% of U.S. Public Schools Affected	Urban School Discount	Rural School Discount
<1%	3%	20%	25%
1-19%	31%	40%	50%
20-34%	19%	50%	60%
35-49%	15%	60%	70%
50-74%	16%	80%	80%
75-100%	16%	90%	90%

ward: the more students a school has who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, the higher the school's discount (see chart). Oh, one more thing: Because they face higher telecommunications costs, rural schools get a slightly deeper discount.

Recognizing that not all schools participate in the federal lunch program (only 22 percent of private schools do),

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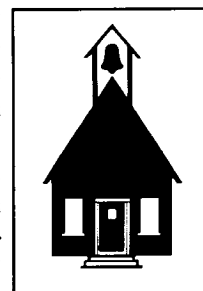
America Reads: A Challenge Indeed!

Within the nooks and crannies of the bipartisan budget accord announced earlier this month can be found funding for a new initiative called the *America Reads Challenge*, a program designed to help the nation's youngest students improve their reading skills. As far as private school officials are concerned the program is aptly named: the "challenge" will be securing services for the children in their care.

The \$260 million program proposed by the President purports to fund "effective local reading programs for pre-school-aged children and children attending both public and private schools." But the design of the program, as described in legislation introduced by Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-MA) and Rep. William Clay (D-PA), makes private school participation highly improbable. The bill (S. 664/H.R. 1516) would authorize funding for reading specialists and tutor coordinators who would recruit and train volunteer reading tutors to provide individualized after-school, weekend, and summer reading tutoring for needy children from pre-school through fourth grade.

Funds would be awarded to each

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the FCC agreed to allow schools that lack actual counts of lunch-eligible students to use "federally-approved alternative mechanisms" to determine the number of students who would be eligible if the school were to offer the lunch program. One approved alternative involves conducting a survey of the family income levels of students.

Discounted telecommunications services should be available starting January 1, 1998. To apply for a discount, schools must have an independently approved technology plan in place and must certify, among other things, that they have the funds necessary to carry out the plan. Representatives from various national private school groups, including NAIS, NCEA, and USCC, are currently involved in preparing an information kit to help private schools deal with the technical details of the application process.

Impact on Private Schools

We know from the NCES survey that private schools have a long way to go when it comes to connecting their classrooms to the Internet. Even public schools with the highest percentages of students eligible for the national school lunch program are more likely to be able to access the Internet than the typical private school. The survey also tells us that 61 percent of private school administrators consider funding a major barrier to the acquisition of telecommunications services. Given the bare-bones budgets of most private schools and the tight fiscal constraints they face, that figure comes as no surprise. Thus, a key question is whether the help provided by the FCC plan will be enough to give struggling private schools the lift they need to get their students on the Net.

At a news conference on the day of what he called the FCC's "historic" decision, Vice President Al Gore said, "Today's decision will help to ensure that all of our children — whether rich or poor, from inner cities or isolated rural communities — have the same access to the vast resources of the Internet." Only time will tell whether that proves true for children in private schools.

Court Watch

• "Oyez! Oyez! Oyez!" With the traditional proclamation that marks the start of a U.S. Supreme Court session, oral arguments got underway at 10 AM, April 15, in *Agostini v. Felton*, a case which could result in an historic decision on government aid to students attending religious schools.

Acting U.S. Solicitor General Walter Dellinger, speaking for the Clinton Administration and the U.S. Department of Education, started the sometimes spirited session in the mahogany and marble courtroom by asking the nation's highest tribunal to overturn its 1985 ruling in *Aguilar v. Felton*, which bars public school teachers from providing Title I instruction in religious schools. He said the enormous costs incurred by school districts in complying with *Aguilar*, the court's jurisprudential shift in subsequent decisions, and the fact that five sitting justices think *Aguilar* was decided incorrectly justified a reversal. Representing the other side, attorney Stanley Geller, who successfully argued *Aguilar* in 1985, argued among other points that the court should not use the current case to reverse its 1985 deci-



Morton M. Avigdor, Associate General Counsel at Agudath Israel of America, at a news conference outside the Supreme Court, following the oral arguments in Agostini.

sion, claiming that a procedural rule to get the court to overturn *Aguilar* was being misused by his opponents.

The procedural matter may turn out to be a pivotal point in this case. At issue is whether Rule 60b of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure provides the proper opportunity to secure a reversal. "You have to put your foot in the door properly," said Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, raising doubts about the use of the rule.

The court is expected to issue its decision sometime around July 1.

• Some may regard it as a routine court pronouncement in an abstract war of ideas, but for the 1,800 low-income Cleveland students affected, it is a ruling that means all the difference in the world. They are the human face of the decision by the Ohio Court of Appeals to strike down the Cleveland scholarship program, and as it looks now, they may not be able to continue in their schools next fall. The court ruled earlier this month that the program violated the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution as well as two provisions of the Ohio Constitution: the religious clause and a clause that requires uniform applicability of general laws.

Clint Bolick, cofounder of the Institute for Justice, a public-interest legal group that defends the rights of low-income parents in school choice cases, spoke recently at a Washington gathering about how hard the loss had been, but he said the Ohio appeals court decision was by no means the last word in this matter. As he wrote in an analysis of the decision for school choice allies, "It is clear that no victory will come easily. But it is even clearer that the real-world payoff, in terms of brighter educational prospects for children who desperately need them, is greater than many of us dared to hope. The course ahead may prove difficult, but undoubtedly it is the right one, and well-worth the fight." Attorneys are preparing to ask the Ohio Supreme Court for an expedited appeal.



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state, which in turn would award subgrants to eligible local applicants. An "eligible applicant" is defined as a consortium consisting of a public school district or public schools within the district "and at least one other public or private agency or organization" (such as a library, museum, or civic group). As it turns out, the "consortium" is under no obligation to serve students in private schools — and therein lies the problem. The design all but guarantees that private school students will be shut out of services. Imagine what, if any, Title I services such youngsters would be receiving today if school districts were not required to serve them.

Since funding for the new reading program is now part of the budget deal, it's a sure bet that some version of the legislation will be approved by Congress and signed into law. Although the budget deal sets overall funding levels, it leaves it to lawmakers to hammer out program details through the regular legislative process. Thus, the President's bill is still subject to some redesign. Private school officials are working on amendments to ensure the equitable participation of our students in what otherwise appears to be a worthwhile program with a grand purpose: to bolster the reading skills of "children attending both public and private schools."

cape-scope...

Results from the 1996 NAEP science tests are in, and they show above-average performance for students in pri-

NAEP 1996 Science Average Scale Score

	Public	Private
Grade 4	148	163
Grade 8	148	162
Grade 12	149	155

ate schools. Scores are reported on NAEP science scales. Scale scores for students at each grade level range from about 105 for students at the 10th percentile to about 192 for students at the 90th percentile.

White House Conference: Child's Early Years Are Critical

Time was when the first day of first grade was seen as the start of a child's education. But now neuroscientists are saying that by first grade a child is already well past the prime time of brain growth. It's a child's earliest experiences — lullabies, bedtime stories, and giggly games of peek-a-boo — that map the neurological circuitry conducive to emotional health and intellectual aptitude. By first grade, parents and teachers have pretty much missed their best chance at influencing key components of a child's development. The implications of the latest findings in brain research for families, schools, and public policy are nothing short of astounding.

To focus the nation's attention on the critical influence of a child's earliest experiences in shaping subsequent learning and development, the President and First Lady hosted last month a White House Conference on Early Childhood Development and Learning. The conference brought together neuroscientists, pediatricians, early childhood educators, business leaders, child-care experts, and media magnets to discuss recent scientific findings about the brain and how those findings can be disseminated and put to use.

Dr. Patricia Kuhl, whose research at the University of Washington centers on language development, said that by 6 months a baby is well on her way to cracking the language code, even though she hasn't said so much as her first "ma-ma." Dr. Carla Shatz, a neurobiology professor at Berkeley, described the incredibly intricate "wiring" that takes place in a child's brain as experience weaves an elegant web of neuron connections. The consensus among panelists seemed to be that the experiences a child has in the first three years of life provide the foundation for future growth, and the years from 3 to 10 present a particularly prime time for learning.

What all this means for education and public policy is still unfolding. But at least one speaker at the White House

conference noted that while the early years are the most critical for learning, they receive the least amount of public attention and money. With a child's emotional, intellectual, and social development on the line, would we not do well as a nation to invest more time and money in early childhood education? It is, after all, an investment with a potentially limitless return.

Early Childhood Resources

For the growing number of private schools expanding services to include programs for pre-primary children, the following resources should be of help.

- The Families and Work Institute will provide up to 1,000 copies of a parent booklet entitled *The First Years Last Forever* as well as 100 copies of a community booklet entitled *Community Mobilization*. The booklets in the quantities mentioned are available for a \$50 shipping fee. For more information write to Leslie Cunningham, GMMB&A, 1010 Wisconsin Ave., NW, Suite 800, Washington, DC 20007.

- An abridged version of the Carnegie Corporation's report *Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children* is available on the web (www.carnegie.org) or by calling the Carnegie Corp. at 1-800-998-2269.

- A beautifully produced book called *Rethinking the Brain: New Insights Into Early Development* captures — in easy-to-understand terms — the latest research on brain development and its implications for all of us. It is available from the Families and Work Institute for \$25 plus \$3.50 s&h, and can be ordered on the web at www.familiesandwork.org.





capenotes

• What? Is it true? *The New York Times* is rethinking its steadfast stance against vouchers? Well, in an April 25 editorial, the paper that prints “all the news that’s fit to print” saw fit to print the following: “[A] study of the longest-running experiment in Milwaukee suggests that vouchers can improve the prospects of the poorest and least prepared students.... More work needs to be done to see if the gains are sustained. But the Milwaukee data should serve notice on the teachers’ union — and large, urban districts everywhere — that if the schools do not improve quickly, vouchers could become irresistible.”

• The study the *Times* was talking about was conducted by Harvard professor **Paul E. Peterson**. He writes about his research on the Milwaukee choice program in an article titled *The Case for Choice*, published in the May-June edition of *Harvard Magazine*. “The results after three and four years [of attendance at a choice school] are mod-

erately large,” writes Peterson. “If they can be generalized and extrapolated to 12 years, much of the national difference in the reading performance of whites and minorities could be eliminated. All of the differences in math performance could be erased.” The full text of Peterson’s research report on school choice can be found on the web at <http://hdc-www.harvard.edu/pepg/>.

• If you’d like to know what percent of the nation’s private schools have access to the Internet (25 percent) or the average student-to-computer ratio in private schools (nine to one), then download a copy of the just-released report on *Advanced Telecommunications in U.S. Private Schools, K-12* (www.ed.gov/nces/pubs97/97394.html). The long-awaited publication, made available earlier this month by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), presents the results of a survey conducted in the fall of 1995 through something called the Fast Response Survey System (FRSS).

• A gold mine of information for private schools is the U.S. Department of Education’s publication *Serving Pri-*

vate School Students With Federal Education Programs. It, too, is available on the web (www.ed.gov). When you get to the Department’s website, click on “publications,” then click on “guides.”

• Ever wish your school’s outstanding record of success was more widely recognized? Well, the U.S. Department of Education’s **Blue Ribbon Schools Program** provides an opportunity for just such recognition. Since the program’s inception in 1982, nearly 600 private schools have been named Blue Ribbon Schools.

Applications are now available for the 1997-98 secondary school cycle. Once again, CAPE is privileged to administer the program for private schools. Principals of secondary, junior high, or middle schools can receive an application by sending the following information to CAPE by mail or e-mail (cape@connectinc.com): name of principal, name of school, street address, city, state, zip+4, telephone, fax, e-mail address, and the names of national private school organizations with which the school is affiliated (e.g., NCEA, NAIS, LC-MS, etc.).