

cape Council for American Private Education outlook

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Alternative Schooling on the Rise Competition Sparks Improvement

It's "starting to resemble a revolution." That's how *The Washington Post* described the growing level of interest across the nation in alternatives to public schools. In a front-page article in the October 1 edition, the paper reported that home schools and charter schools are multiplying at a record pace, while many private schools are filled to the brim.

What accounts for the current quick-step march toward alternative education? According to the *Post*, it's a combination of factors ranging from frustration with the bureaucracy in public schools to a desire for an education more value-based, more effective, and less impersonal.

While private schools overall are experiencing a rapid rate of growth, some segments within the community are clearly outpacing the pack.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, enrollment in the nation's private schools grew at a brisk 6 percent between 1990 and 1993 (the year covered in the Center's most recent statistical profile of private schools). But during the same three-year period, enrollment in conservative Christian schools rose 17 percent, and enrollment

in the subset of those schools affiliated with the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) shot up 42 percent. Still, no component of the private school community seems to be growing at a faster clip than Jewish schools, where enrollment climbed at a breakneck rate of 61 percent during the three years in question.

Jewish Schools Burgeon

Quite by coincidence, on the same day as the *Post* story, *The New York Times* ran a feature article on the burgeoning of Jewish schools in America, which it said is driven in part by demographic trends, a renewed interest in

Jewish culture, and a growing desire "to maintain Jewish identity." "It is important to be open minded and to know about other cultures, but you have to start by knowing who you are," said Lora Dagi, a ninth grader quoted in the article. "If you don't know who you are, how can you ever hope to understand

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Conferees Face Tough Choices

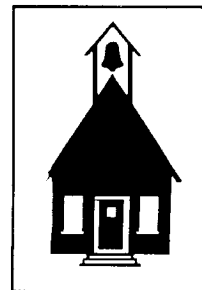
Amid multiple threats of filibusters and vetoes, House and Senate conferees will be working this month to hammer out differences in various spending bills for fiscal year 1998. A number of highly contentious issues are at stake, promising a rough ride ahead for negotiators.

National Tests

Conferees face an uphill climb toward resolving the different testing amendments the two houses approved last month. By a vote of 87-13 on September 11, the Senate passed an Administration-endorsed compromise plan which calls for the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB), not the U.S. Department of Education, to oversee the tests. Five days later the House, led by Rep. William Goodling (R-PA), voted 295-125 to prohibit any use of federal funds for the development and administration of the tests.

The President has threatened to veto the education spending bill if it does not include national tests. Sen. John Ashcroft (R-MO), one of 27 senators who have signed a letter to conferees urging that national tests be dropped from the bill, has promised a filibuster if

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anyone else." The article cited a 1993 study by Avi Chai which claims that Jewish day schools are a bulwark against cultural assimilation.

Competition Sparks Improvement

Not surprisingly, the new interest in alternative education seems in some ways to be helping all education. The *Post* claimed that the trend is sending "a powerful message to public schools," causing officials to redouble their efforts at school improvement. Full-day kindergartens, new enrichment programs, and enhanced services are some of the changes being made by certain districts to stem the migration.

Supporting the argument that competition fosters improvement, the *Times* in a separate piece in the September 30 edition reported that when a privately-financed scholarship program caused over 100 students to leave Giffen Memorial, a public elementary school in Albany, NY, the city's school board made "sweeping changes ... to restore community confidence" in the school. As the *Times* saw it, "[I]n their overhaul of Giffen, city school officials seem to have inadvertently bolstered a central argument for vouchers: that they foster competition and thereby force public schools to improve."

Short-lived or Long-lasting

Is the recent surge in interest in alternative education a fad or something more enduring? Opinions seem to differ. The *Post* said that some observers say "the emerging shifts in schooling are seismic;" they see "signs of profound change ahead." Others regard the trend as temporary and marginal. But whether short-lived or long-lasting, there is little doubt the phenomenon is prompting thoughts of reform in public education. As Robert Chase, the president of the National Education Association, told the *Post*, "I'm not sure if any of us really knows yet where these trends are leading us. But it had better make us take a hard new look at what we're doing in public education."

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the tests are included, and Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D-NM) has promised one if they are not. This one could be a doozy.

DC Scholarships

On September 30, the Senate tried but failed to close off a Democrat-threatened filibuster of an amendment to the DC appropriations bill which would have provided scholarships of up to \$3,200 to approximately 2,000 low-income students in the District. The 58-41 vote on cloture fell two votes shy of the three-fifths majority that was needed to limit debate, but on the plus side, it revealed solid support for the measure in the Senate. The vote was pretty much on party lines, with all but one Republican (John Chafee, RI) voting for it and all but four Democrats (Daniel Patrick Moynihan, NY; John Breaux, LA; Mary Landrieu, LA; Joseph Lieberman, CT) voting against it. Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT) did not vote.

An hour before the Senate vote on the \$7 million amendment to the \$4.2 billion spending bill, President Clinton took the unusual step of reading a statement outside the Oval Office urging Congress to defeat what he called "a voucher program that would support private academies for a very limited number of students."

The House is expected to pass the DC appropriations bill with the scholarship provision intact. A House-Senate conference will then try to iron out the differences between the two bills and might very well retain the scholarship program.

Evidence of a rising tide of support for the proposal came in the form of editorial endorsement from *The Washington Post*, which said the scholarship amendment would "give 2,000 children a year an alternative they currently lack" and "might help energize the public schools."

Taking a different tack, Secretary Riley denounced the DC initiative and similar measures as "draining public tax dollars from public education to subsidize private education."

"Not true," replied Cardinal Hickey

of the Catholic Archdiocese of Washington. "The impression created is that the \$7 million earmarked for scholarships was taken right out of the DC schools budget," he said. "Scholarships are a separate budget item with separate funding."

Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-CT) also responded to the "drain" myth during the Senate debate on the amendment. "[F]unding for our program comes from the federal payment to the city. It would have no impact on the DC school budget," said the Senator.

Gorton Amendment

In a move that took almost everyone by surprise, the Senate voted 51-49 in mid-September to approve an amendment offered by Sen. Slade Gorton (R-WA) which calls for the consolidation of nearly all of the K-12 programs administered by the Department of Education into block grants to LEAs. A local school district would be free to decide what programs and activities the block grants would support. If enacted into law, this measure could have a devastating impact on certain services to youngsters in private schools — services specifically mandated by programs which the Gorton amendment would eliminate. Allowing each local school district to decide how to spend its block grant without any requirements for serving children in private schools could very well torpedo whatever help those students currently receive.

Timeline

Although the federal fiscal year began October 1, lawmakers are a long way from approving various appropriations bills. As a stopgap measure, Congress has passed temporary spending legislation to avoid a government shutdown and any disruptive gaps in cash flow. The continuing resolution covers the period through October 23, but there is already talk about the need to extend the resolution into November.



CAPE Commentary: The Drain Refrain

Education Secretary Richard Riley called a news conference last month to launch a double-barreled assault on school choice, lashing out at the DC scholarship initiative and the Coverdell IRA proposal. While zealously defending public education, the Secretary unfortunately used the occasion to pit students in public schools against those in private schools by depicting aid to the latter as a direct drain on aid to the former. "The last thing we should be doing at a time when so many of our schools are bursting at their seams," he said, "is to be draining public tax dollars from public education to subsidize private education."

The core of the Secretary's argument is that every nickel of assistance to children in private schools is a nickel less for children in public schools. It is, of course, a core empty of content. It rests on the presumption that all potential help for private school students must necessarily be drawn from a revenue pool expressly earmarked for public schools — a clearly preposterous position. In the case of the DC scholarship initiative, for example, the money for scholarships is part of the District's general funding, not the public school budget. As Senator Joe Lieberman put it, if the \$7 million program were not enacted, the DC public schools would not get a penny more than they otherwise would.

Now the revenue-drain refrain is not unique to the Secretary; it is pretty much a mantra among voucher opponents. Is it possible they believe that public schools have an exclusive claim on all tax revenue, so that all government expenditures and all forms of taxpayer relief are to be regarded as robbing resources from public schools? But if that's their position, why do they apply the drain charge so selectively? Why, for example, wasn't the \$1,500 HOPE scholarship program for college costs described as siphoning public school resources? What about the recently enacted \$500 child tax credit? Why do school choice opponents seem so determined to stigmatize help for youngsters in private schools by describing it alone — among all federal expenditure items and tax reductions — as a public school revenue robber?

Is public education a bedrock institution in America? Of course it is. Is it deserving of substantial tax support? Absolutely. But to depict aid to deserving children in one type of school as siphoning aid from similar students in another is to drive a wedge between two segments of American education and to foster rivalry and division where there should be solidarity.

The Administration's drain charge is also a slippery slope towards unraveling a decades-old view of education spending that, fortunately, was instituted in a far more generous and inclusive time. Programs like Title I and others based on the child-benefit theory — which the Secretary himself has championed time and again — regard all youngsters as part of the American family and reach out equitably to those in need, regardless of the school they happen to attend.

The Secretary based his remarks at the news conference

on a white paper prepared for the occasion by the U.S. Department of Education. Now the term "white paper" is ordinarily used to describe a report that is in-depth, balanced, well-researched, and authoritative. This particular document falls short on all counts and is more accurately described as a "partisan paper," intended to present one side of the voucher argument — the Administration's side.

But apart from offering a lopsided case against vouchers, the document also puts forth a far more disturbing and dangerous position. Astoundingly, it seems to suggest — and sometimes not so subtly — that public schools are the best schools for America. In the paper's first section, entitled *Public Schools, Democracy, and Free Enterprise*, public education is described as "fundamentally American," "the foundation of democracy and a free enterprise economic system," "the open door to American success and good citizenship," and "the American way to achievement and freedom."

The document's very first page includes an unsettling quote from Neil Postman's book *The End of Education*, stating that public schools create "the right kind of public" and thereby contribute toward "strengthening the spiritual basis of the American Creed." The paper then bluntly claims that "private school vouchers strike at this ideal."

Amplifying that theme, Secretary Riley in his remarks at the news conference said, "Vouchers undermine a 200-year American commitment to the common school — a commitment that has helped America keep faith with our democratic ideals...." He added, "Vouchers would begin the unraveling of this uniquely American fabric — the common public school that is open to all and gives everyone a fair chance to succeed."

In sum, public schools are the true-blue American schools. The implications for schools other than public are plain.

In a country where there are lots of answers to the question "What is the good life?" there is no one right school system. Fortunately, our nation is blessed by a rich diversity of schools: some rooted in a particular religious tradition, some that provide intensive academic experiences, some that are specialized for particular populations. There are all sorts of schools in America that do not neatly fit into a single mold. But together they constitute the American educational experience, and together they share a common goal: the education of our country's children. Whether public or private, these schools strive to instill in students a love of democracy and to prepare them for productive citizenship. The fact is that students who attend private schools are no less tolerant of diversity, no less supportive of democratic principles, no less embracing of American ideals than students who attend government schools. To suggest otherwise is to offend millions of loyal Americans who have relied on private schools for all or part of their own education — Secretary Riley's boss included.





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• With all the hoopla surrounding the contentious appropriations process, the **Coverdell/Gingrich PASS A+** proposal has taken somewhat of a back seat. But the bill (H.R. 2373, S. 1133), which allows parents and others to establish an *A+ Account* to save for their child's education at any K-12 school, is now slated to be put in final form at a meeting of the House Ways and Means Committee on October 9. Congressional leaders plan to move the bill first in the House and then in the Senate.

• Although a favorite Washington pastime lately is to debate what's wrong with American education, the **National Association of Elementary School Principals** provided a welcome respite September 26 when it honored 60 stellar examples of what's right: this year's recipients of the National Distinguished Principals Award. The five awardees from private schools were: Brenda N. Feehan, Our Lady of Mercy School, Merced, CA; Melba J. Hanssen, St. Paul Lutheran School, Mt. Prospect, IL;

Kathleen M. Berlino, St. Mary's School, Pompton Lakes, NJ; Sr. Harriet L. Hamilton, St. Mary's School, Cortland, NY; Mr. William M. Broderick, River Oaks Baptist School, Houston, TX. CAPE congratulates all the honorees!

• It's a race to see which school choice case gets to the U.S. Supreme Court first. The **Institute for Justice** reports there are five state school choice lawsuits pending (Arizona, Maine, Ohio, Vermont, and Wisconsin), each a potential candidate for eventual review by the High Court. In the latest case, the Arizona Education Association filed a lawsuit September 30 in the Arizona Supreme Court challenging the state's tax credit of up to \$500 for contributions to private school scholarships and \$200 to public school extracurricular activities.

• Still no word yet on the forms and procedures for schools to use in applying for the **telecommunications discounts** which are due to start January 1, 1998. But in a step toward that goal, FCC Chairman Reed Hundt recently appointed members of the board of directors of the Schools and Libraries Corporation. The seven-member board

is charged with administering the application process, creating a website for the process, and educating the public about the program. Board members include Ann Bryant, Executive Director, National School Boards Association; Henry Marockie, President, Council of Chief State School Officers; Brian Talbott, Executive Director, American Association of Educational Service Agencies; Kathleen Ouye, City Librarian, San Mateo Public Library; and Ken Brody, Managing Partner, Winslow Partners. A service-provider representative and a CEO of the corporation are expected to be named shortly.

Let Your Voice
Be Heard!
*There's too much
going on to stay quiet.*
CAPE's Legislative
Conference
March 17-18, 1998
Westin City Center Hotel
Washington, DC