

cape Council for American Private Education outlook

"Voice of the Nation's Private Schools"

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Education Savings Bill at a Glance

√ S. 1134 amends the law governing current college-level savings accounts by increasing the allowable annual contribution from \$500 to \$2,000 and by allowing the accounts to be used for elementary and secondary education costs.

√ Allowable education costs include tuition, fees, academic tutoring, special needs services, books, supplies, computers, uniforms, transportation, and supplemental items connected with education in public, private, or home schools.

√ The bill allows entities such as corporations, charitable organizations, and foundations to make contributions to a student's account.

√ The savings accounts component of the bill provides \$2.4 billion in tax relief over 10 years.

√ The bill also:

- provides for federal tax-free distributions from state tuition programs;
- expands the current tax exclusion for employee-provided education expenses by allowing graduate-level courses to be included;
- provides certain tax breaks in connection with bonds for school construction.

Senate Tackles Education Savings Bill

For the fourth year in a row, the U.S. Senate is considering a proposal that would allow parents to save for a child's elementary, secondary, or college education using special accounts that earn tax-free interest. The bipartisan measure (S. 1134) would expand existing college-only savings accounts by increasing the maximum annual contribution from \$500 to \$2,000 and by allowing them to be used for expenses connected with K-

12 education in public, religious, independent, or home schools. A vote is expected sometime in March.

The effort to enact the bipartisan bill is once again being led by Senators Paul Coverdell (R-GA) and Robert Torricelli (D-NJ), who both wield considerable influence within their respective Senate caucuses. Coverdell serves as secretary for the Senate Republican Conference, and Torricelli is chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee.

The two senators launched the proposal at a news conference on February 23, where Senator Coverdell said he was "very hopeful" that the country would "finally see this important relief provided to America's families this year."

On the floor of the Senate,



Sen. Paul Coverdell (R-GA) discusses education savings accounts at a news conference last month.

Coverdell claimed the accounts would be used by 14 million families to help 20 million children—almost half the country's elementary school population. Over the course of ten years, families using the accounts would realize a total of \$2.4 billion in tax relief, the result of having invested \$12 billion in their children's education. "I have always been stunned by how little incentive it takes to cause Americans to do huge things," he said.

Coverdell called the money invested in these accounts "smart dollars," because parents could direct them "like a laser beam" on the child's specific needs. As he put it, the money would go "right to the target."

Senator Torricelli said that President Clinton, in establishing college-level savings accounts, had laid the foundation for the K-12 accounts. "[W]hat was a good idea for higher education at \$500 is a great idea for secondary schools at \$2,000. Same idea, same formula with the same end."

Responding to critics who claim the accounts would

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Former Chancellor Offers Novel Plan to Increase Education Funds

If any response typifies the reaction of most public school advocates to proposals for government help for students in private schools, it is the drain refrain: the boilerplate claim that any nickel of support for private education is a nickel drained from public education. So it is somewhat surprising, if not startling, when a staunch public school supporter calls for a commitment of public resources to help with the education of children in all schools. But that's exactly what Dr. Frank Macchiarola did in a speech at the twenty-sixth annual conference of the New York Collaborative of Public and Nonpublic Schools.

Dr. Macchiarola takes a back seat to no one when it comes to coaxing policymakers to provide sufficient resources for public schools. The former schools chancellor for New York City is a public school advocate par excellence. But he also has great respect for the work being done by New York City's private schools and knows there are more

students in the city than the public schools can handle. He argued at the conference that the best way to increase state support for the education of the city's children would be for the state to provide a per capita funding amount for all students.

Two Groups of "Have Nots"

Macchiarola pointed out that the funding fix faced by public and private schools has produced "two groups of 'have nots' fighting for scraps" at the statehouse door and "often locked in unhealthy competition." If every student were to receive some state aid, he reasoned, all boats would rise on the flood of new funds caused by both communities mounting an unprecedented common effort on behalf of all children. "Instead of fighting alone, the school children's lobby would include a huge array of supporters," he said.

Calling on education advocates to focus on consumers rather than provid-

ers, on "what the youngsters need" rather than on "what the schools should get," Dr. Macchiarola said that for too long public and private school officials have "failed to cooperate with one another in our advocacy efforts." A common venture on behalf of young people "must take place," he said. "Let us not fear that someone is going to steal something we don't have."

Kind Words for Private Schools

Although he knows a lot about public education, Dr. Macchiarola, the current president of St. Francis College in Brooklyn, has also had experience with Jewish and Catholic schools. He said his experience has led him to conclude that such schools provide much more than a basic education to children. "They promote tolerance in their curricula, they lead children to understand the importance of moral codes, and they contribute to the great diversity in this nation that has made it great."

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divert dollars from public schools, Torricelli said, "Not one dime of money that is now going to a public school goes anywhere else but to that same school on that same basis. This is new money, private money...." He said the federal government should be doing everything it can to encourage parents to save for the education of their children. "Taxing that money is the last thing we should be doing."

No Apologies

In answer to charges that the accounts mostly benefit wealthy students in private schools, Senator Torricelli said that 70 percent of the money invested in the accounts would benefit families who earn \$75,000 or less and 70 percent of the beneficiaries would be public school students. Acknowledging that some of the money saved by parents would benefit private school students, Torricelli said, "I am not here to apologize for that." He said in many cities, private schools are "the only alternative

available to many families who want something better for their child." Besides, said the senator, no public money is being used to pay for a child's private education. "A family takes their own

money, earned off the sweat of their own brow, puts it in a private account, and uses that money, which has not been taxed because of this legislation, and pays tuition. That cannot be a bad thing."

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New Book Brings Insight and Energy to Choice Debate

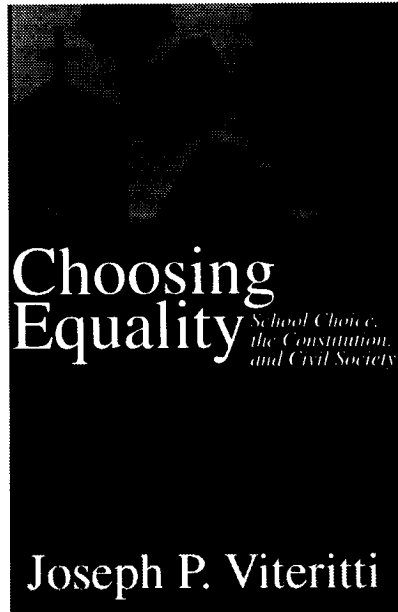
It's hard to imagine that with all the weighty tomes already published on school choice, a book can appear that brings fresh insight and energy to the issue. Yet, Joseph Viteritti's *Choosing Equality* is as original and invigorating as it is scholarly, combining a passionate commitment to equity with meticulous research to make a compelling case for giving needy children the chance to escape failing schools.

Equality of Opportunity

Viteritti charts a multi-course tour of the country's failed efforts to ensure equality of educational opportunity for all children. He traces the social, cultural, legal, and political threads of this complex issue throughout American history and interweaves them into a coherent backdrop for the current debate. The chapter on the role of religious and independent schools in society provides an exhaustive review of the social science research—from the breakthrough studies of James Coleman to the recent work of Paul Peterson—on the advantages of such schools for poor children. The chapter on constitutional issues examines the tortuous jurisprudence that has burdened the subject of government assistance for children in religious schools across First Amendment history. And the chapter entitled "Religion and the Common School" presents an engaging, sweeping review of the cultural clashes between proponents of uniformity in education and defenders of diversity. A high point is the treatment of the bristling and bigoted debates about Blaine amendments in state constitutions, which to this day still curtail the rights of parents who choose religious schools.

Past and Present

Viteritti has a knack for connecting history with the present. In his telling of the great school wars—the 19th century battles over the educational equivalents of monism and pluralism—there is a clear connection to current-day disputes.



More than a century later, we still hear in civic discourse the tired refrain that public schools are best for society and private schools are detrimental to democracy. In a review of the role of religion in education, Viteritti depicts a public school system that morphs from first being saturated with the tenets of majority religion to now being soaked in secularism, with scant accommodation for those who cannot subscribe to its secularist doctrines.

Central Premise

The book's central premise is that America's efforts to ensure equal educational opportunity for all its citizens have failed, and the best way to reverse the failure is to provide poor children access to better schools, including private and parochial ones. Tracing the pursuit of educational equality from the *Brown* decision, to bussing, to compensatory education, to school finance reform, Viteritti demonstrates how ineffective these approaches have been in attaining their goal. Too many children of the poor are still consigned to failing schools, he argues, and the best way out is to give their parents what wealthy parents have: the chance to choose schools that work. "If there is any hope

of translating the principles of equality into a reality," he writes, "then poor people must be given the opportunity to make their own choices when it comes to the welfare of their children."

Role of Religion

One change that choice would bring, says Viteritti, is an enhancement of the role of religion in revitalizing disadvantaged communities. The house of worship is a bedrock institution in disadvantaged neighborhoods, and the direct involvement of the faith community in education would go a long way to spark not only educational equality, but social and political renewal as well.

Claiming that America is now in the second stage of its discussion on school choice, Viteritti argues that the debate has grown from its first generation, best associated with the market model of Milton Friedman, to a more progressive level, in which public policy is focused on the needs of poor students in substandard schools. Such policy, he says, "appears more consistent with the redistributive agenda of liberal social theorists than the laissez-faire predilections of free market economists."

Significant Work

Although not all of Viteritti's principles for school choice are likely to sit well with everyone, *Choosing Equality* is a significant, if not seminal, work in school reform literature. With education being a "basic social good" and an "indispensable ingredient" for full participation in the cultural, civic, and economic life of society, the book's core admonition is harsh but necessary: "America must come to terms with the fact that it has failed to provide the most disadvantaged members of its national community with a proper education; and we all live the lesser because of it."





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• In his seventh address on the state of American public education, which he delivered in Durham, North Carolina, on February 22, U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley listed the ways public schools have recently improved. His indicators of success included the following: "[T]he vast majority of students at our nation's top colleges and universities are public school graduates." Now in case that fast ball slipped by you, we note that of course most students in the best colleges are public school graduates. An application of Occam's razor (the principle that the best explanation is the simplest) tells why: 75 percent of all high school graduates in the country come from public schools. One would expect the majority of students at any college to be public school graduates.

To no one's surprise, the Secretary also used the speech as a chance to slam vouchers. "I am tired of the negative political voices that tell us that vouchers will solve the problem of failing schools," he said. "Vouchers drain funds from public education, and they divert us from

the real challenge of lifting up all of our children." And lest Mr. Riley be accused of beating around the bush on the topic, he added, "Vouchers are a mistake."

US CHARTER SCHOOLS

• The U.S. Department of Education last month released *The State of Charter Schools—2000*, the fourth-year report of a national study on charter schools. Among the findings: "An additional 421 charter schools opened in 1999, bringing the total to 1,484 charter schools in operation in 31 states and the District of Columbia as of September 1999." And in the private-schools-be-careful department: "Ten percent of all charter schools were private schools prior to their conversion to charter status."

The full report is available at the following address: <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/charter4thyear/>.

• The Senate inched closer toward the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) last month when Jim Jeffords (R-VT),

chairman of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, released his ESEA proposal. The committee was expected to take up the bill (S.2) in early March.

With respect to certain Title I provisions that pertain to students in private schools, Jeffords's bill is similar to the Title I bill that the House passed last fall (H.R.2). It would, for example, expand the options available to a school district for determining the number of low-income students in private schools, and



would also require a more comprehensive consideration of the views of private school officials when it comes to third-party contracts.

More information about S.2 is available at: <http://www.senate.gov/~labor/index.htm>.

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