

Council for American Private Education

CAPE outlook

Voice of America's private schools

President Promotes School Choice in NCLB Plan

President Bush last month unveiled a plan to improve the *No Child Left Behind Act* that includes a school choice proposal and several other provisions affecting private schools. The act, which was signed into law in 2002 and is up for renewal this year, is the centerpiece of the administration's education reform agenda.

The announcement of the school choice initiative came in a single line in the State of the Union address. "We can lift student achievement even higher by giving local leaders flexibility to turn around failing schools, and by giving families with children stuck in failing schools the right to choose someplace better," said the president.

Details of the NCLB plan emerged the next day when the Department of Education released a blueprint to strengthen the law. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings said the core components for ensuring student success were higher standards, increased accountability, rigorous coursework for secondary school students, and "innovative, new options and choices for families."

Promise and Opportunity

The choice initiatives fall into two categories: Promise Scholarships and Opportunity Scholarships. Under the former, low-income parents of children in public schools that go into restructuring status would be offered scholarships worth approximately \$4,000 to attend a private school or an out-of-district public school. Alternatively, students who elect to stay

in their current school could receive up to \$3,000 to cover the costs of intensive tutoring. According to a USDE briefing document, students using the scholarships to attend a private school would "take their state's assessment or a standard national assessment in the same grades and subjects assessed in their original school."



Secretary Spellings speaks in Chicago January 25 to promote the president's plan to strengthen the *No Child Left Behind Act*. (USDE photo)

Under the Opportunity Scholarships program, the federal government would establish a competitive grant program to enable willing local communities to provide scholarships similar to those offered in the choice program

for the District of Columbia, which is also funded by the federal government. Low-income families whose children are assigned to schools identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring could use the scholarships to attend private schools. Scholarships would be worth the sum of the tuition, fees, and costs (including transportation) connected with attending the school but would be capped by the average per-pupil expenditure in the state's public schools. The president has included similar voluntary school-choice incentive programs in all his budget proposals since 2003, but, except for the D.C. initiative, Congress has not approved any of them.

Other Private School Provisions

Although the president's choice proposals are designed to assist students currently enrolled in public schools, other components of the blueprint focus on services to students in private schools. For example, a measure to give school districts greater latitude to transfer funds from one federal

education program to another would also make it easier to "consolidate and transfer funds" intended for services to private school students and teachers.

Many longstanding federal programs serve students in need regardless of the type of school they attend, public or private. The original *No Child Left Behind Act* reauthorized those programs and the administration's blueprint reaffirms the principle of equitable services. "At-risk students should have access to academic services regardless of where they attend school," declares the document. Moreover, the plan calls for "extending the longstanding requirements for equitable participation by private school students and teachers to new programs and initiatives where appropriate, as well as to existing programs such as Striving Readers and Troops-to-Teachers." Striving Readers is designed to improve the reading skills of students in middle school and high school who are reading below grade level. Troops-to-Teachers helps military personnel become teachers in public schools that serve low-income students. The change would presumably allow program participants to teach in private schools serving similar students.

The NCLB improvement document also endorses greater flexibility for private schools in connection with federal programs that serve their students and teachers, and provisions that would improve communication between private and public schools.

Swift Reaction

Reaction to the administration's school choice proposals was swift. The House Education and Labor Committee's senior Republican, Rep. Howard P. "Buck" McKeon (R-CA), who last year sponsored legislation similar to the Promise Scholarships proposal, said, "If we are truly seri-

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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 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
- 28 Affiliated State Organizations

a coalition of national associations serving private schools K-12
Executive Director: Joe McTigue

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First Lady Visits Private School in Louisiana

Acknowledging the role played by private schools “in helping children whose lives were devastated by the hurricanes,” First Lady Laura Bush paid tribute to those schools by visiting one of them, St. Rosalie School in Harvey, Louisiana.

In remarks at the school, Mrs. Bush said schools are a vital part of the region’s recovery, providing education, counseling, and support to the thousands of children affected by the hurricanes. The first lady reported that Hurricanes Katrina and Rita closed over 1,100 schools and displaced over 372,000 students. She said the families that want to return to the affected areas “want good schools.”

Outlining the progress that has been made in the region, Mrs. Bush said that since the hurricanes hit, 71 percent of damaged schools in Louisiana have reopened and 56 public schools in New Orleans are now in operation. “We know that the routine of going to school is the most comforting routine for children, and the sooner we can get all children on the Gulf Coast back in the school they want to be in, the better off we’ll all be.” Mrs. Bush cautioned, however, that more teachers are needed in the region. She encouraged teachers across the country “to consider building your careers here.”

The first lady spoke of how hard and quickly St. Rosalie and other schools worked to provide schooling after the storms. She said that after September 2005 students from schools in the Catholic Archdiocese of New Orleans “were scattered throughout 49 states,” but by November 2006 “98 percent were back, attending the school of their choice.” What’s more, new students accompanied the returning students. As Mrs. Bush put it, the Catholic schools of New Orleans “also opened their doors to thousands of public school students displaced by the storm.”

As an example of the heroic work undertaken by the region’s schools, the first lady pointed to Archbishop Rummel Transition School in Metairie, which “helped hundreds of families return by taking students from any area school that closed.” She also noted that Cathedral Academy “welcomed the children of first responders who lived on mercy ships” right after Katrina struck. According to Mrs. Bush, “archdiocesan representatives spent three evenings aboard those

mercy ships registering students, and they asked for no tuition.” Even now, “1,500 public school students remain in Catholic schools, their tuition paid entirely by the archdiocese.”

Turning to how the St. Rosalie School community reacted to the storm, Mrs. Bush said the principal, pastor, and staff, assisted by Navy Seabees and the National Guard, “cleared debris and started new construction” soon after the storm’s passing, with community members cooking meals each day for the workers. “In less than two months, your doors were re-opened,” she reminded the audience, and “no child has been turned away because his parents couldn’t pay.”

Mrs. Bush told the story of Leslie Silva, a third-grade teacher at the school who had de-

livered a new baby just days before the hurricane. Two other children, Ilissa and Brock, are students at the school. Katrina hit the Silva family hard. Their house was destroyed, and Leslie lost her mother in the storm. At the invitation of the pastor and principal, the Silvas located their temporary FEMA trailer in the school’s parking lot. Mrs. Bush said that with toys and bicycles and neighborhood children coming over to play, the parking lot “looked a lot more like a suburban backyard than a stretch of asphalt.” And although the Silvas were eventually able to move back into their own house, the first lady said she knows “they’ll also call St. Rosalie home.”

Last November, the school received a \$20,000 grant from the Laura Bush Foundation for America’s Libraries to help rebuild its book collection. The foundation’s Gulf Coast School Library Recovery Initiative has donated approximately \$2 million to 40 schools in Louisiana, Mississippi, Florida, and Texas.

For Mrs. Bush, St. Rosalie School served as a symbol of countless schools and communities that have worked and are still working tirelessly and generously to serve victims of the hurricanes. In concluding her remarks, the first lady said that “in communities throughout Louisiana and Mississippi, people of many backgrounds and faiths are hard at work so that families can come home to a Gulf Coast that promises better schools and more opportunities for their children.” She added, “President Bush and I thank you very, very much for your hard work.”



Mrs. Laura Bush addresses the students, faculty, and invited guests during her visit to St. Rosalie School, Tuesday, Jan. 9, 2007, in Harvey, Louisiana. (White House photo by Shealah Craighead)

Private School Leaders Testify on School Safety

Private school leaders, testifying at a meeting January 16 of the Education Secretary's Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Advisory Committee, said government programs that help schools prepare for a crisis should extend equitably to all schools. "When it comes to ensuring the health and safety of children, the government should treat all students alike," said Joe McTighe, CAPE's executive director.

The committee scheduled the private school session at the request of Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, who last October pledged during the White House Conference on School Safety to have the committee examine how to include private schools in government plans and programs to help protect students.

McTighe told the panel there was a common-sense component to involving all schools in crisis plans. "All students are citizens, and all citizens are entitled to certain protections." He said police officers, firefighters, or first-aid providers do not put some students in a second-class treatment category on account of the type of school they happen to attend. "If a fire breaks out at a public school, they are there; if one breaks out at a private school, they are there. They are there because their mission is to protect the public, and children in private schools are part of the public." He said the same evenhanded treatment should be practiced by government agencies at the federal level.

In other testimony, Patrick Bassett, president of the National Association of Independent

Schools, noted the recent favorable change in law allowing private schools to receive reimbursement from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for facilities damaged in a federally declared disaster. Bassett, whose testimony covered a host of health and safety issues, also cited the blending of federal relief efforts with the private school community's outreach to students displaced by the 2005 hurricanes as an example of how the government and the private sector can "do powerful things quickly when called upon."

Michael Caruso, assistant superintendent for the Archdiocese of Washington, DC, offered a variety of suggestions for action in his testimony, including "regional school summits on homeland security to prepare all schools in American to act as a seamless education community in the event of one or more catastrophic or otherwise horrific incidents." Regarding the Safe and Drug-Free Schools grant program in which private schools participate, Caruso proposed requiring school districts to advise private school officials of the per-capita funding available for services to private school students and teachers each year. And with respect to the department's Emergency Response and Crisis Management competitive grant program, Caruso called for application review protocols that ensure the meaningful inclusion of private schools.

Transcripts of the testimony and discussion are available at: <<http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/sdfscac/meeting.html>>.

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ous about meeting the goals of No Child Left Behind, we must equip parents with every available option so their children can learn, succeed, and grow."

Clint Bolick, president and general counsel of the Alliance for School Choice, said, "We're glad to see the administration's emphasis on getting kids out of failing schools." He added, "We hope that the bipartisan spirit our new congressional leaders have pledged will encompass efforts like these to rescue children in some of the worst schools in the nation."

Opponents of school choice were consistent in theme and terminology, regularly employing the term "vouchers" and insisting they would divert funds from public education. Reg Weaver, president of the National Education Association, said, "This plan calls them 'Opportunity Scholarships' and 'Promise Scholarships,' but let's call it what it is: a voucher. School vouchers, by any name, divert limited resources from underfunded public schools."

Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA), chair-

man of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, said, "I am disappointed that the administration has once again proposed siphoning crucial resources from our public schools—already reeling from increased requirements and budget cuts—for a private school voucher program."

In the House, Representative George Miller (D-CA), chairman of the Education and Labor Committee, called the scholarships "the same bad idea they have always been, regardless of what they are labeled." He said, "Private school vouchers, which would divert taxpayer dollars away from public schools that need them, have been rejected in the past and nothing has changed to make them acceptable."

Neither Kennedy nor Miller had any comments on the proposals relating to improvements in equitable services under federal programs for students in private schools. Both men are long-time supporters of equitable services, and private school officials are hopeful they will support, and even propose, various improvements in NCLB to strengthen equity.

No NOAA Radios

Three federal departments (Commerce, Education, and Homeland Security) have sponsored a program entitled "America Is Safer When Our Schools Are Safer: A New Program to Protect Our Children." The initiative involves the distribution of NOAA all-hazard public-alert radios to schools. According to the program's Web site, the radios are intended "to alert school personnel to severe weather conditions, terrorist threats, and other emergencies" even when regular lines of communication are unavailable. The thinking is that when a crisis strikes, minutes can make a difference.

But despite its inclusive-sounding title, the program actually protects only some of the nation's students, namely, those in public schools. Astoundingly, it overlooks the six million children who attend private schools.

In a letter last fall, CAPE urged the three agencies to extend the program to private schools, noting that disasters do not discriminate between types of schools. But the response CAPE received from the Department of Homeland Security was a huge disappointment. Here's the key sentence: "When the current distribution [to public schools] is complete, DHS will work closely with the Departments of Education and Commerce to consider possible distribution to additional categories of schools through this joint initiative if there is any remaining funding." In other words, once we finish protecting public school children, if any funds are left over, we will consider the *possibility* of protecting private school children.

CAPE's position is clear: no students should be considered second-class citizens when it comes to matters of health and safety. A program that claims to protect the nation's children should have included all schools from the start. CAPE's hope is that the federal government will resolve this inequity quickly.

Return service requested

CAPE notes

★ **Fast Fact About Private Schools:** The National Center for Education Statistics estimates that out of 55.6 million children in grades PK-12 in 2007, 6.5 million, or 11.7 percent, are in private schools. Source: Projections of Education Statistics to 2015, table 1, available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/projections/tables/table_01.asp>.

★ New York Governor Eliot Spitzer, a Democrat, proposed a budget on January 31 that includes a new personal income tax deduction of up to \$1,000 per child for parents who pay tuition in K-12 private or public schools.

Two days before releasing the budget, Spitzer, in his first address on education policy since his election, called for more funds for public education, but at the same time said the state “should support parents who choose to send their kids to private and parochial schools” to the extent “the law and our fiscal resources allow.” The governor said that many private and parochial schools “do an excellent job of educating many of our kids and they deserve our thanks and support.” Although he said the state’s first priority should be funding for public education, at the same time he identified a level of service to which all children are entitled regardless of the school they attend. “We also need to ensure that all children in our state, whether in public or nonpublic schools, receive the basic services to which they are entitled, including the books, transporta-

tion, and specialized support they need to learn.” Spitzer’s budget reflected a continuation of state aid directed toward those needs.

In a statewide poll of registered voters conducted by Siena College’s Research Institute on January 24-25, New Yorkers gave Spitzer a 75 percent approval rating.

★ The latest issue of the Association of Christian Schools International’s *Legal Legislative Update* reports on what its front-page headline calls a “Great Legislative Victory for California Schools.” A question had developed in the state as to whether private school teachers were professional employees exempt from overtime compensation regulations under the state labor laws. According to the ACSI article, “Under federal law and the laws of 49 states, schoolteachers are considered professional employees and, as such, are exempt from receiving overtime wages if they work more than 40 hours in a week.” But the status of private school teachers was not clear in California, at least until last month when a new law took effect that addressed the issue.

Ron Reynolds, executive director of CAPSO, the California Association of Private School Organizations (the state CAPE organization), led the state’s private school community in a successful advocacy effort that ended last summer when Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed into law AB 2613, which, according to CAPSO, clarifies “California labor law relating to the

exemption of private school teachers from overtime compensation regulations.”

As the ACSI article put it, “Strong legislative contacts and masterful coordination with nearly all the private school groups in the state enabled CAPSO to work toward solving the problem....The work of CAPSO was key to this legislative success!”

★ The Federal Resources for Education Excellence (FREE) Web site now makes it easier than ever for teachers to find hundreds of valuable teaching and learning resources, thanks to its new and user-friendly design. Teachers can search for resources by subject area (math, history, science, etc.) and then by subgroups within each category to help narrow the search. Under the history menu and the 1914-1945 subgroup, for example, one can find hundreds of links to resource sites, including the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, which provides “an online workshop, teaching guide, chronology, personal histories, lessons, and other publications for teaching about the Holocaust.” Math teachers can explore MathTools, which “offers hundreds of online tools, lesson plans, and learning activities for teaching and learning math,” including tools for studying “percents, functions, fractals, tessellations, platonic solids, area, geometric shapes, probability, and other topics.” The FREE Web site may be found at: <<http://free.ed.gov/>>. The definition of “tessellations” may be found in any online dictionary.