

Council for American Private Education

CAPE outlook

Voice of America's private schools

Scholarship Tax Credit Bill Introduced in Congress

As the spring brings new buds, a new Congress brings new bills. To date, members of the 114th Congress have had no trouble planting their fair share of legislative proposals (nearly 3,000 and counting), many focusing on education, and some even promising real reform.

Two bills that fall in the latter category are S. 809 and H.R. 1511, Senate and House versions of the *Educational Opportunities Act*, which would empower low-income parents to choose the best schools for their children by providing a federal tax credit for donations to private school scholarship funds.

U.S. Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) and U.S. Representative Todd Rokita (R-IN), who chairs the House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education, introduced the bills in their respective chambers.

"It is shameful that the only parents in our country who don't have choice regarding their children's education are parents living in poverty," said Rubio. "This bill will ensure every parent and child has access to a school that best suits their learning needs where they can thrive and go on to become America's future leaders."

Congressman Rokita said the bill "would help thousands of students from low- and middle-income families attend schools of their choice." He added that the legislation "capitalizes on Americans' generosity and would increase access to educational opportunities without spending more money."

Dollar-for-Dollar Tax Credit

The *Educational Opportunities Act* would encourage individual taxpayers and businesses to contribute to what the bill calls a "scholarship granting organization" (SGO), a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization whose exclusive purpose would be to provide scholarships to offset school expenses, including tuition, for eligible

students. The encouragement would be in the form of a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for the amount of the contribution, up to \$4,500 for an individual and \$100,000 for a corporation.

250 Percent of Poverty Line

SGOs would award scholarships to students from families whose annual income is not over 250 percent of the federal poverty guidelines (roughly \$60,500 for a family of four).

The schools that enroll scholarship students must, according to the bill, "charge tuition for attendance" and "comply with all applicable state laws, including laws relating to unlawful discrimination, health and safety requirements, and criminal background checks of employees."

Annual Reports

Participating schools must also agree to provide (1) an annual report to the parents of each scholarship student on the student's academic achievement and (2) an annual report to the SGO on the overall test performance of scholarship students on a national norm-referenced test of the school's choosing. The SGO report must disaggregate results by grade level and race or ethnicity.

SGOs must also meet certain requirements. They cannot "earmark or set aside contributions for scholarships on behalf of any particular student or to any specific school or group of schools." They must also verify the compliance of eligible families with the program's annual income requirements, and undergo an annual audit from an independent certified public

accountant. Further, they must provide scholarships to multiple students in multiple schools.

Program Evaluation

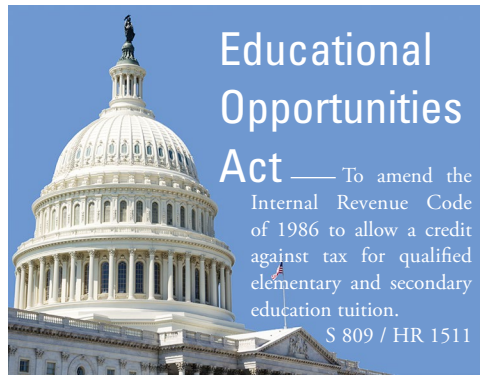
To monitor the program's effectiveness, the Director of the Institute of Education Sciences at the U. S. Department of Education would be required to conduct an annual evaluation using the results of the norm-referenced tests administered in participating schools as well as retention rates and, for secondary schools, graduation rates and college-admission rates. The evaluation would also determine whether the program has increased the satisfaction of parents and students and the involvement of parents in the education of their children.

No Issue More Pressing

The American Federation for Children, which advocates for parent choice in education, welcomed the measure.

"There's no single domestic issue more pressing than fixing our nation's antiquated education system, and the *Educational Opportunities Act* will empower parents throughout the country to have access to quality educational options that are otherwise out of reach," said AFC Chair Betsy DeVos. "It is long past time for our education system to embrace bolder reform, and that begins by offering parents greater educational choice, challenging the status quo and ensuring that children are no longer trapped in schools that are not meeting their needs."

The bill text is available at <[Congress.gov](#)>. [photo ©alisonhancock/Dollar Photo Club]



CAPE

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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Hess to Private School Leaders: Bust Out of Your Cages

Rick Hess had a hard-hitting message for leaders of the private school community: You've built cages around yourselves that block innovation, and it's time to bust out of them.

The director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute delivered the message—along with numerous practical illustrations—during a smart, engaging, and thought-provoking talk to CAPE's national and state leaders March 16 in Washington, D.C. Drawing from two recent books, *Cage-Busting Leadership* and *The Cage-Busting Teacher*, Hess told the group that private school educators “have been unfortunately afflicted with the same inertia and timidity that we generally find in public school systems.” But public education is “massively stymied by rules and regulations and contracts and bureaucracy”—conditions (and excuses) that don't apply to private schools.

Organizing Students and Teachers

Hess contends that most private school leaders are shaped by the same preparation programs, texts, and studies developed for public school leaders, and thus tend to fall into the same habits of practice. For example, leaders from both sectors organize students and teachers in the same way—a way that may have made sense a hundred years ago but is probably not suited for 2015.

All teachers in a school, regardless of their skills, generally follow the same routine: teaching for several periods, pulling cafeteria duty, teaching some more, and then perhaps monitoring dismissal. Hess suggests taking a cue from the medical profession. A hospital's best pediatric surgeon does not spend time watching patients eat Jell-O in the cafeteria. School leaders need to deploy staff in ways that take full advantage of the best talent available. Excellent teachers should do more of what they are excellent at and less of what other employees can do. Of course, that kind of redeployment of talent would likely involve rethinking compensation in order to retain the best and brightest.

Technology

Turning to technology, Hess covered several themes addressed at length in a book he wrote

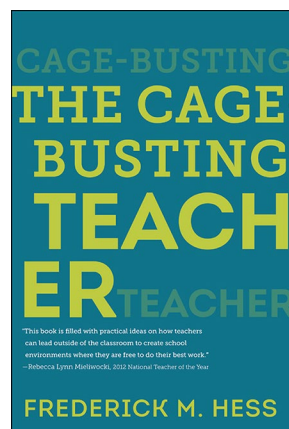
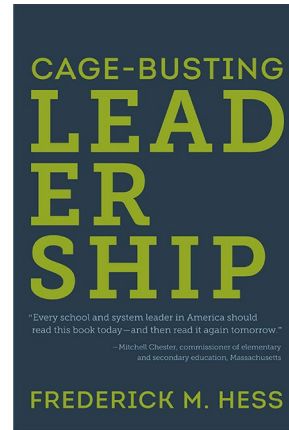
with Bror Saxberg called *Breakthrough Leadership in the Digital Age*. For Hess, the power of technology is not in shiny new gadgets themselves but in how those tools are put to use by smart educators to improve the essential elements of learning.

Hess noted that students learn to master skills through “demonstration, deliberate practice, and feedback.” Technology can provide students with real time feedback and plenty of practice that lead to a satisfying sense of accomplishment. At the same time, it can free teachers from tedious, rote tasks so they can spend more time mentoring, coaching, and explaining—in other words, doing the things they're supposed to be doing. Hess believes that technology is no more anti-teacher than X-rays are anti-doctor or baseball bats are anti-athlete. “These are tools that professionals use in their work,” he said. What's more, private schools “have more freedom” to incorporate technology in ways that “augment what teachers do.”

Educational Excellence

For Hess, education in America over the past 15 or so years has focused too narrowly on performance in reading and math, and has lost sight of a broader vision of excellence. Science, art, foreign language, and athletics have been pushed aside in pursuit of upticks in math scores, reading scores, and graduation rates. Turning that mindset around in public education is “like turning a giant aircraft carrier.” However, many private schools already have a “robust notion of excellence” and “a sense of the child as a person.” It would be helpful, he said, to have the private school community “leading more forthrightly and visibly” on this issue and to have “researchers at universities spend more time documenting what you're doing, and talking about what it looks like to be broadly successful in a way that's more traditional.” Private schools, he said, have “an enormously valuable role to play there.”

In fact, said Hess, in all the areas he talked about—leadership, talent, technology, and notions of excellence—there are “enormous opportunities in the private school sector...to lead and illuminate so that we can have all of our schools do better for all our kids.”



College Board President: Students Need More Opportunities

“This country does not need more tests; it needs more opportunities.” Thus spoke the president of the College Board, the iconic creator of a treasure trove of high-stakes tests that measure high school performance and predict college readiness. To be sure, the irony was not lost. Still, in a single sentence, David Coleman signaled a dogged determination to redirect the organization in his charge toward opening more equitable, just, and balanced pathways toward success for America’s students.

Coleman spoke at a meeting of leaders of CAPE’s member organizations and state affiliates on March 16 in Washington, D.C. He explained the rationale behind the redesigned SAT and talked with enthusiasm about an impressive array of projects at the College Board aimed at expanding opportunities for students. But in an unexpected twist, Coleman also offered reflections on what he called the “remarkable special ideals of independent and religious schooling and its crucial role in the tapestry of American education.” He then challenged private school leaders to consider how they themselves might help reshape the “landscape of college admission.”

Focused, Open, and Useful

The new SAT, which will be administered for the first time in spring 2016, will be, according to Coleman, “focused, open, and useful.” Ideally, it will stir not fright, anxiety, and uncertainty in students, but “productive practice.” Gone will be “SAT words,” those obscure terms that few people use or encounter except when preparing for the SAT, and in their place will be a rich analytic vocabulary that students will be sure to come across in college and will need to succeed in life. Math will focus on key topics used in early college courses, drawing from the areas of problem solving and data analysis, the “heart of algebra,” and advanced math. Moreover, each exam will invite students to analyze a passage drawn from one of the country’s founding documents or a related conversation. Preparing for the test should be useful and productive. In fact, Coleman takes delight in envisioning students shunning thick test-prep books for a re-read of, say, the Gettysburg Address.

One enemy of promoting productive practice, said Coleman, is secrecy. So to combat

secrecy, the College Board has published the entire blueprint of the SAT, explaining exactly what will be tested and providing sample test items. What’s more, it has joined forces with Khan Academy to provide state-of-the-art online test preparation free of charge to everyone. Students from families that can afford high-cost test prep courses will no longer have an advantage.



David Coleman, president of the College Board, speaks to the CAPE community March 16 in Washington, D.C.

All In

Coleman is determined to expand opportunities for students traditionally underrepresented in high-quality colleges. The College Board’s “All In” program is an extensive effort to encourage Latino and African-American students to take challenging AP courses for which they have demonstrated potential. Another program provides information packets and fee-waiver coupons to low-income, high-SAT-scoring

students to encourage them to apply to the country’s most selective colleges and universities.

Productive Solitude

Turning to the role of private schools in American education, Coleman made clear that he not only defends the right of such schools to exist, but positively values their existence. In particular, he noted the importance of certain ideals and practices that religious and independent schools embody, including “productive solitude” and “reverent reading.”

“In our age, the technology of interruption has far outpaced the technology of concentration,” Coleman said. But “any serious academic work and spiritual work” requires “being productive alone.” The very structure of prayer and religious practice found in certain schools fosters such productive solitude, he said.

The reverent, deep, loving reading of shared texts is another cherished value in religious and independent schools. Surrendering to the text, letting it seep within, and being present to new revelations of meaning are important elements of growth and understanding. To illustrate the point, Coleman quoted from C.S. Lewis on how to submit to a work of art: “Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way.”

Coleman even suggested that the values, ideals, and practices going on in many private schools might serve to inform a broader conversation within American education. Such schools, he said, have “gifts to give, habits to instill.”

Frenzied Pursuits

College Board President David Coleman’s comments last month to CAPE’s leaders about the importance of “productive solitude” and “reverent reading” certainly connected with the culture of religious and independent schools (see story at left). But another point of connection was his desire to dial back the frenzied schedules of college-bound students eager to impress admissions officers.

Coleman said research shows that apart from academics, the best predictor of college success is “sustained commitment to an extracurricular activity for many years.” Staying with a passionate pursuit suggests grit, determination, perseverance, and resilience, and also correlates with a likelihood to succeed.

What the research does not show, Coleman noted, is that engaging in dozens of after-school pursuits makes one more likely to be ready for college. He decried the overscheduling of students eagerly whisked by parents from one after-school pursuit to another. Such children lose the chance to simply enjoy childhood—to play, wonder, nurture the spirit, and spend time with family.

Coleman’s message struck a chord with CAPE’s board of directors, the CEOs of CAPE’s member organizations. In a follow-up conversation, board members talked about the value of conveying to parents and college admissions officers that a deep, sustained focus on a passionate interest, rather than a scattered, superficial dabbling in countless after-school activities, not only predicts success, but also reflects important traits of character. They agreed that if college gatekeepers were to communicate clearly to families that they are looking for signs of determination and perseverance in students, it could go a long way toward helping children and their parents reclaim the inherent joys and benefits of a balanced childhood and family life.

Return service requested

CAPE notes

★ On March 31, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported on how well the nation's students understand the meaning of words.

NAEP's comprehensive reading assessment includes a vocabulary portion that measures how well students can "demonstrate their understanding of words as used in literary and informational texts that they read."

According to the report, the national average fourth-grade NAEP vocabulary score in 2013 was 219, and the average eighth-grade score was 266. For private school students, the average fourth-grade score was 235, while the average eighth-grade score was 286.

The 2013 NAEP Vocabulary Report is available at <www.nationsreportcard.gov>.

★ A recent headline in *The Wall Street Journal* captured the current state of parent choice legislation across the country: "Push for Private Options in Education Gains Momentum."

As the article put it: "So far this year, at least 34 states are considering proposals to create or amend programs that offer private education options, up from 29 last year, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. The number of states considering education savings accounts has doubled to 16 since 2014."

Here is an update on state activity:

- March 31: The Arkansas Senate concurred with the House in approving a scholarship program for special needs

students. Governor Asa Hutchinson is expected to sign the bill.

- March 30: The Tennessee Senate voted 23-9 in favor of the *Tennessee Choice and Opportunity Scholarship Act*.

- March 30: The Montana Senate agreed to provide a tax credit for donations to private school scholarship funds or to innovative programs in public schools.

- March 26: The Mississippi Senate approved the *Equal Opportunity for Students with Special Needs Act*, the third education savings account (ESA) program in the country. The bill, which has already passed the House, is expected to be signed by Governor Phil Bryant.

- March 26: The Nevada Assembly approved the *Educational Choice Scholarship Program*, which provides tax credits to businesses that donate to private school scholarship funds.

- March 25: The Colorado Senate approved a tax credit for parents who move their children from public schools to private schools or home schools, and a separate tax credit for third parties who provide a private school scholarship to a child.

★ Why are parent choice measures gaining such momentum? In a *New York Post* opinion piece on March 22, Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo explained why he proposed an education tax credit (ETC) this year, and his explanation may have application elsewhere.

Affirming that "one of the most important paths to opportunity is a good educa-

tion," Cuomo said his ETC "would expand options for families seeking additional choices in the grades before college."

Cuomo also offered an economic rationale for ETCs: "Many nonpublic schools, especially parochial, are facing increased costs and are closing." Those closings are costly to taxpayers because public schools must absorb new students. "Closing off this education option increases the burden on a struggling public system without doing anything to improve it."

The tax credit Cuomo is supporting would be capped at \$100 million, half benefiting public education and half benefiting school scholarship organizations.

The governor argued that the ETC is needed because "[s]tudents need additional options." He called the program a win for public schools, private schools, students, parents, and taxpayers. But most of all, "it is a win for the future of New York state because it expands opportunity for our children."

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