

Council for American Private Education

CAPE outlook

Voice of America's private schools

April an Abundant Month for Parent Choice

As it brought nature to abundant life, April brought hope to children, with legislatures in six states approving measures to expand the right of parents to choose their child's school. Lawmakers in Arizona, Arkansas, Mississippi, Montana, Nevada, and Tennessee thrust the school choice movement into warp drive with an impressive mix of new programs, including education savings accounts, vouchers, tax credits, and tax-credit scholarships. Except for Montana, all the bills have been, or likely will be, signed into law.

The flurry of legislative activity this spring brings to 24 the number of states with private school choice programs, not counting town "tuitioning" programs in Maine and Vermont or scholarship programs in the District of Columbia and Douglas County, Colorado.

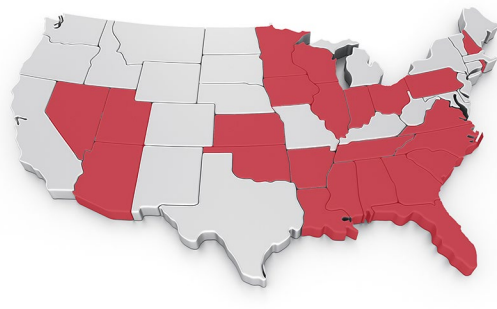
Arkansas

Arkansas joined the ranks of school choice states April 8, when Governor Asa Hutchinson signed legislation to establish the Succeed Scholarship Program, allowing students with disabilities who are currently enrolled in public schools to attend a religious or independent school starting in 2016-17. The program also applies to dependents of active members of the military. Scholarships will be worth up to approximately \$6,600 dollars with no family income limits.

Participating private schools must be accredited, must comply with federal anti-discrimination laws, and must administer a national norm-referenced test to students.

The American Federation for Children estimates that 13 percent of public school students will be eligible for the program. "We applaud Arkansas' leaders for their commitment to providing children with special needs access to a quality education that suits their individual needs," said AFC Chair Betsy DeVos. "We look forward to seeing this program grow and serve those who especially need a customized education."

States with Parent Choice Programs



Nevada

Just five days after the Arkansas measure became law, Nevada Governor Brian Sandoval signed the Nevada Educational Choice Scholarship Program into law.

"This is a great day for students across Nevada," said Sandoval when the legislature approved the measure. "The creation of opportunity scholarships ensures that all children, regardless of financial ability, will have the opportunity to attend a school that provides an education that best suits their needs."

The new law—the state's first school choice program—authorizes tax credits of up to \$5 million in fiscal year 2015-16 with a 10 percent annual increase each year thereafter. Corporations will receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for donations to

nonprofit organizations that award scholarships to children allowing them to attend private schools. Students from families with annual incomes up to 300 percent of the federal poverty line (\$72,750 for a family of four in 2015) are eligible for the scholarships, which are worth up to \$7,755 per student the first year with increases in subsequent years based on the Consumer Price Index.

Tennessee

On April 22, the last day of the legislative session, Tennessee joined the school choice community when legislators approved the Individualized Education Act, which establishes education savings accounts for public school children with disabilities that are specified in the bill.

Under the new law, the state will deposit in an eligible student's savings account each year an amount equal to the regular per-pupil funding plus any special-needs funding the student would have generated in a public school. Parents may use the

funds to cover costs connected with the educational program of their choice, including enrollment in a private school. The statute details the kinds of expenditures allowed, including the

costs of tuition, transportation, therapies, textbooks, tutoring services, and other education expenses. After the child graduates from high school, any unused funds in the account may be applied to higher education expenses.

The new law is "an innovative program that will offer Tennessee parents with

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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 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
 Executive Director: Joe McTighe

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countless options in order to meet their child’s special learning needs,” said Tony Niknejad of the Tennessee Federation for Children. “We’re glad to see parents whose children have unique needs will be offered new choices.”

Once the bill is signed into law by Governor Bill Haslam, Tennessee will be the fourth state in the nation to have an education savings account (ESA) program.

Mississippi

Just a week earlier on April 16, Mississippi became the third ESA state (Arizona and Florida are the other two) when Governor Phil Bryant signed the Equal Opportunity for Students with Special Needs Act. The law establishes a five-year pilot program that provides \$6,500 per student for school year 2015-16 and additions or subtractions from that amount in subsequent years depending on percentage variations in state school aid. Up to 500 students will be able to participate in the program’s first year, with 500 more students to be added each year thereafter.

Like the program in Tennessee, funds will be deposited by the state in each student’s account, and parents will be able use the money for a variety of qualifying expenses, including private school tuition and fees, textbooks, payments to a tutor, the purchase of a curriculum, online learning programs, and other services or therapies. Students will remain eligible for the program until they complete high school.

Participating private schools must be accredited by a state or regional agency or be approved/licensed by the state’s department of education.

The new law also provides that, starting in 2018, the state must prepare a biannual report to assess various components of the program, including student and parent satisfaction, student performance on standardized tests for those parents who have requested participation in such tests, student performance on AP exams and other exams related to college admission, high school graduation rates, college acceptance rates, and the program’s fiscal impact.

“Today is an important day for families in Mississippi,” Governor Bryant said at the signing ceremony. “When only 22.5 percent of special needs students graduate high school, something is terribly wrong.” He said the law offers children “a better opportunity to succeed and will

give their families the power to make the educational choices that they deem best.”

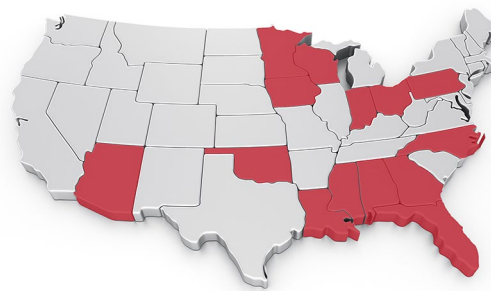
Arizona

The nation’s first education savings account program expanded significantly on April 7 when Arizona Governor Doug Ducey signed a bill to extend ESAs to children living on Native American reservations.

“I’ve been adamant in my commitment to ensuring that all Arizona students have access to the best education possible,” said Ducey. “This bipartisan legislation is a simple but significant step in the right direction.”

According to the Arizona-based Goldwater Institute, the bill allows approximately 55,000 additional students to participate in the program, which already serves students with special needs, students in failing schools, children adopted from foster care, and children in active-duty military families.

States with Two or More Programs



Democratic Senator Carlyle Begay, who comes from the Navajo Nation, sponsored the bill. “On tribal lands, we don’t have the luxury of fighting over public versus private education,” said Begay, according to the Arizona Daily Independent. “We are in an ongoing crisis when it comes to educating our kids, and we welcome any high-quality options to help with this crisis,” he added. “I don’t believe that ESAs will solve all the education challenges on tribal lands, but empowering our parents is a great first step.”

“Native American students should have access to a great education, just like every other student in Arizona,” said Jonathan Butcher, the Goldwater Institute’s education policy director. “It’s past time they are given the opportunity to attend a school that will best meet their needs.”

Montana

Finally, on April 24, the Montana House and Senate approved a conference committee version of legislation to provide tax credits for contributions to the state’s public school system (for innovative educational programs) or to private school scholarship organizations. The credit allowed would be equal to the amount of the donation but could not exceed \$150. Further, the aggregate amount of tax credits in a given year could not exceed \$3 million.

Montana Governor Steve Bullock is not expected to sign the bill, having vetoed similar legislation in the past. [map © zentilia/Dollar Photo Club]

Students Don't Know History, Geography, or Civics

"Don't know much about history....Don't know much geography." Unfortunately, those two lines from Sam Cooke's catchy hit of 1960 pretty much capture the results from the latest assessment of the nation's students.

On April 29, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) released *The Nation's Report Card: 2014 U.S. History, Geography, and Civics*, and the findings were bleak.

Less than 30 percent of U.S. eighth graders managed to score proficient or higher on any of the assessments. Twenty-seven percent reached that level in geography; 23 percent did so in civics, and only 18 percent in history.

"The lack of knowledge on the part of America's students is unacceptable, and the lack of growth must be addressed. As a country, we must do better," said Terry Mazany, chairman of the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB), which oversees the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). "Geography, U.S. history, and civics are core academic subjects that must be a priority. They represent knowledge and skills that are fundamental to a healthy democracy."

Type of School

Performance varied significantly by the type of school a student attended, public or private, with the private school advantage for the percentage of students scoring proficient or higher amounting to 19 points in geography, 16 in civics, and 14 in history (see charts).

NAEP reports average scale scores as well as the percentage of students who reach or exceed certain achievement levels: basic, proficient and advanced. According to NAGB, "The basic level denotes partial mastery of the knowledge and skills needed for grade-appropriate work; proficient denotes solid academic performance; and advanced represents superior work."

Thirty percent of the nation's eighth-grade public school students performed below the

basic level in history; 27 percent did so in geography, and 27 percent in civics. Comparable figures for private school students were 13, 10, and 11 percent.

At the high end of the spectrum, only 1 percent of public school students scored at the advanced level in history, as did 3 percent in geography, and 2 percent in civics. Private school percentages were, respectively, 2, 5, and 3.

Interesting Courses

More than 29,000 eighth-graders participated in the assessments. Besides responding to subject-matter questions, students also answered questions about classroom practices and their views on coursework. For example, 51 percent of public school students and 55 percent of private school students said they often or always agree that social studies/civics/government school-work is interesting.

The survey also showed that students are doing more work online and on computers in social studies than just four years ago.

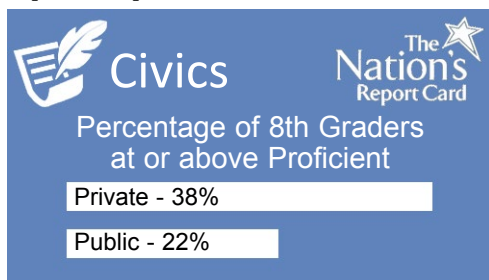
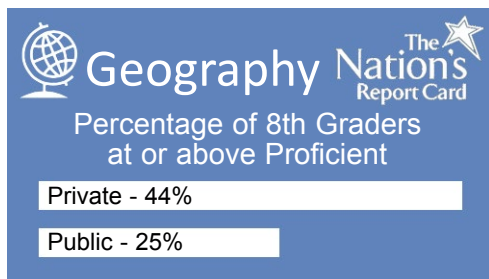
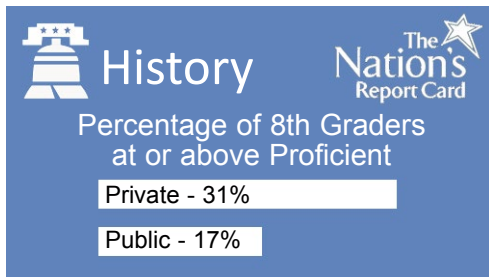
"The way students are absorbing information is changing," said Chasidy White, an eighth-grade geography and history teacher and a NAGB member. "Instruction needs to meet students where they are to improve learning. In my classroom, that means embracing technology and incorporating discussions about current events. I encourage all teachers to use these reports to spark new ideas for their classroom practices."

Questions Tool

One way teachers can put NAEP to use is the NAEP Questions Tool. Questions on NAEP assessments are searchable

by subject, grade, year, and content area. Not only can teachers review, download, and print the questions, but they can also use the tool to create a student roster, make customized tests based on their own lessons, and measure student progress. Students can take the tests online, and teachers can analyze the results.

The tool is available at <nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nqt>.



NAES at 50

The National Association of Episcopal Schools (NAES) will be 50 years old on May 28, and it is celebrating the event with a burst of activity.

NAES schools are currently involved in a "50 Days to 50 Years" campaign on Facebook and Twitter (#naes50th and #episcopal) – a social media countdown to the 28th. The campaign is focusing on a different aspect of Episcopal schools each week, covering themes such as Episcopal identity, worship, equity, and religious studies.

NAES has also embarked on an ambitious "50th Anniversary Gathering Fund," which so far has collected more than \$1 million to support the organization's services.

"We are thrilled to have progressed so far so quickly," said the Rev. Daniel R. Heischman, NAES executive director and CAPE board president.

The fund has helped NAES establish two endowments: one to develop and support school chaplains and the other to nurture future school leaders.

NAES has planned several gatherings to celebrate the jubilee year, including a reception that took place April 21 at the National Cathedral School in Washington, DC.

Maureen Dowling, director of the Office of Non-Public Education at the U.S. Department of Education, told attendees that what distinguishes their schools is the Episcopal ethos. She said NAES helps its member schools learn what it means to be Episcopal and then actively supports them in that "joyful, challenging, and profoundly sacred endeavor."

Dr. Dowling also read greetings from Education Secretary Arne Duncan, who expressed appreciation for the organization's "ongoing commitment to our nation's young people."

More information about the 50th anniversary is available at <www.episcopalschools.org>.

Return service requested

CAPE notes

★ Mention of private schools is sometimes made in unexpected places. Take the U.S. Supreme Court, for instance. During the court’s recent consideration of whether same-sex couples have a constitutional right to marry, Chief Justice John G. Roberts asked U.S. Solicitor General Donald B. Verrilli, Jr., [if the court found such a right] “Would a religious school that has married housing be required to afford such housing to same-sex couples?” Justice Samuel A. Alito, Jr., was quick to note that “...in the Bob Jones case, the court held that a college was not entitled to tax-exempt status if it opposed interracial marriage or interracial dating.” He then asked, “So would the same apply to a university or a college if it opposed same-sex marriage?” General Verrilli responded: “I don’t think I can answer that question without knowing more specifics, but it’s certainly going to be an issue....I don’t deny that, Justice Alito. It is -- it is going to be an issue.”

★ In a [message](#) April 29 to the White House email list, President Obama recalled the enormous impact his fifth-grade teacher at Punahou School had on his life: “I credit my education to Ms. Mabel Hefty just as much as I would any institution of higher learning. When I entered Ms. Hefty’s fifth-grade class at Punahou School in the fall of 1971, I was just a kid with a funny name in a new school, feeling a little out of place, hoping to fit in like anyone else. The first time she called on me, I

wished she hadn’t. In fact, I wished I were just about anywhere else but at that desk, in that room of children staring at me. But over the course of that year, Ms. Hefty taught me that I had something to say—not in spite of my differences, but because of them. She made every single student in that class feel special. And she reinforced that essential value of empathy that my mother and my grandparents had taught me. That is something that I carry with me every day as President.”

The president described the experience as “the simple and undeniable power of a good teacher.” He added, “This is a story that every single kid in this country, regardless of background or station in life, should be able to tell. Sharing stories like these helps underline the vital importance of fighting for that reality.”

★ Speaking of the “undeniable power of a good teacher,” the spring issue of *Gonzaga*, the magazine of Gonzaga University, highlights extraordinary teaching by the university’s alumni at St. Madeleine Sophie School in Bellevue, Washington.

According to the article “All God’s Children,” the PK-8 school is committed to serving an inclusive range of students,

“no matter their economic, ethnic or academic needs.” Forty percent of students have an individualized education plan, and over half the teachers are Gonzaga grads.

Principal Dan Sherman, former executive director of the Washington CAPE affiliate, has high praise for those teachers: “They know how to reach out to our students. Each one is an excellent teacher with an enormous heart.”

Parents like those teachers, too. Tricia Bertsch, the mother of Calvin (pictured left), a child with mitochondrial disease, talked about her first encounter with the school. “The moment we walked in here, we felt like we were home,” she said. “That is what it comes down to.”



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