

Council for American Private Education

CAPE outlook

Voice of America's private schools

Senate Committee Holds Hearing on DC Scholarship Program

At the conclusion of a Senate hearing last month on the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program, Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Chairman Joe Lieberman (I-CT) said the testimony and evidence provided powerful support for the program's continuation. Signaling a new chapter in the push to keep the program alive, Lieberman announced plans to bring a bill embodying that goal to the Senate floor later this year. "We have a fighting chance," said the senator, and "together we're going to fight to keep this program going."

Without Congressional action, the scholarship program, which currently allows some 1,700 students to attend private schools in the District, is slated to conclude after the 2009-10 school year.

Lieberman acknowledged there were "powerful forces allied against the program," but said supporters have "the facts on our side," adding, "We also have justice on our side."

"The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program has been an issue of great national debate," Lieberman said in a press statement. "In the midst of this debate are real people—real parents looking for the best for their children and real children with all the talent God gave them just looking for the opportunity to develop it."

The senator, who has supported D.C. scholarships from the start, said: "The standard for judging any education program should be whether it works, whether it improves the performance of students. That's not a Democratic or Republican—or even an Independent—question. It is a factual question, based on scientific evaluations and test scores. And when we apply that non-ideological, non-partisan standard to the Opportunity Scholarship Program, my conclusion is that the program works."

Lieberman's committee heard testimony

from Patrick J. Wolf, a professor of education policy at the University of Arkansas and principal investigator for the Congressionally mandated study of the voucher program supported by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences. Wolf explained that the program



Chairman Joe Lieberman (I-CT) and Ranking Member Susan Collins (R-ME) at the Senate Committee on Homeland Security hearing on the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, May 13, 2009 (Committee photo)

had "a statistically significant positive impact on the test scores of students in reading" though not in math. The reading gains over three years amounted to an extra 3.7 months of growth for students who were offered and used the scholarships. In addition, parents whose children were awarded scholarships were more satisfied with their schools and more confident about their children's safety than parents from the control group.

Wolf reported that the National Center for Educational Evaluation (NCEE) at the Institute of Education Sciences has published results from only 11 studies that "employ the methodological rigor of random assignment to treatment and control groups." Of the 11 studies, only four, including the Opportunity Scholarship Program, have demonstrated "statistically significant positive achievement impacts in either reading or math."

Commenting on the findings, Senator

Susan Collins (R-ME), ranking member of the committee, said in a press statement, "Experts have carefully studied the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program and concluded that the educational success of the program's participants in reading outpaced those in D.C. public schools....

If Congress were to discontinue funding for D.C. opportunity scholarships, it is estimated that 86 percent of the students would be reassigned to schools that do not meet 'adequate yearly progress' goals in reading and math. We should not allow that to happen."

Equality for All

In releasing his budget for 2010, President Obama proposed allowing the Opportunity Scholarship Program to continue, but only for those students currently enrolled. Senator Lieberman's forthcoming legislation would allow the program to continue

for both current and new students. "In America, it should not be a privilege for our children to get first-rate educations," the senator said. "It should be a right. Without a quality education for all, there cannot be equality for all."

In other testimony at the hearing, Bruce B. Stewart, head of Sidwell Friends School, which participates in the scholarship program, described school choice as "fundamentally American as apple pie." Stewart said the Opportunity Scholarship Program "has prompted scores of historically underserved people to think even more carefully, thoughtfully, and critically about the education of their daughters and sons."

He said choice and competition are "fundamental threads in our country's fabric." Citizens select from options "in the marketplace, in health care, in vocation, in religion, in location of our homes,

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- Friends Council on Education
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in the election of our public officials, and in a host of other key value decisions. Such choice, said Stewart, is far more American “than to select from a few heavily restricted options or a single, forced choice.”

Stewart urged senators to keep the scholarship program going: “Keep the windows you have opened open, and unlock even more. Go forward and not backward: enlarge our national vision, do not narrow it....Ensuring the opening of our educational system so that all are served and served well cannot be left to a matter of chance; rather, it must be brought to a condition of certainty. Continuance of the Opportunity Scholarship Program, in my judgment, is one powerful step in that direction.”

Mayor Anthony Williams

Also offering testimony was former D. C. Mayor Anthony Williams, one of the program’s founders. The mayor said that in early discussions surrounding the program, “It became clear to me that there was no reason to deny these parents the opportunity to make the best choices for their children—the same choices that more affluent people make every day.” He said the program has resulted in higher test scores, “overwhelming parental satisfaction,” more parents involvement in education, and positive changes in children, including “improved attitude toward learning, increased self-esteem and enthusiasm towards school.” Scholarship students are also attending schools “that are more integrated and have smaller class sizes.”

Mayor Williams made reference to a rally held May 6 in the District’s Freedom Plaza, where he said over 2,000 parents, children, and community members came together to support the Opportunity Scholarship Program and to present to District officials a petition with over 7,400 signatures calling for the program’s continuation. He asked, “What is a better measure of success than the desire of parents?”

The mayor said that so far over 2,600 students have benefited from the scholarships and demand remains high, “with more than 8,000 children applying.”

Imploring the committee to reauthorize the OSP, Williams said, “It is not enough to fund only the current children while not accepting new applications. That decision would split up

families, could force the closure of some schools, and seems to be made based on political compromise rather than on the facts.” Williams urged lawmakers to “put aside politics in favor of doing what is best for the children.”

Testimony from Participants

Committee members also heard from a parent and two students involved in the program. Latasha Bennett, the single mother of a second grader at the Naylor Road School, explained that her son, Nico, “loves his school, his teacher, his friends, and the staff.” She said Nico “is part of the reading and debate club and now wants to be a doctor.” Her son would be devastated, she said, if he had to leave Naylor because of the scholarship program’s termination. With an annual income of \$12,200, “I can’t afford to send him there on my own.”

Ms. Bennett recently applied for a DC Opportunity Scholarship so that her four-year-old daughter, Nia, would be able to attend kindergarten in September at the same school as her older brother. Although initially advised that Nia was eligible for a scholarship, Bennett was later told

that the scholarship had been rescinded because of the program’s precarious future. “I want Nia to have the same opportunity to excel as well as her older brother,” said Bennett. “My children really need this program to continue,” she said. “Without it I truly don’t have a clue as to where I will send them to school. My assigned neighborhood school is not an acceptable place.”

Deputy Youth Mayor for Legislative Affairs Ronald Holassie, a tenth grader at Archbishop Carroll High School, testified about his experiences as a scholarship recipient since junior high school. He said the program “has changed my life and has made me the successful young man standing before you now.” The scholarships have given him “a proper learning environment, a high quality education, and a brighter future.” But he also said his hopes could be dashed if the scholarship program is not reauthorized. “I am struck that someone would take away my chance and others’ chances of having a brighter future of success,” he said. “Everything I have worked for in my high school years would be lost.... No one should take that away from me and the other 1,700 children in this program. We have been on a long road and have come so far and been through so much to get to where we are today.”



Students and parents rally at Freedom Plaza in support of the Opportunity Scholarship Program, May 6, 2009 (NCEA photo by Christianne Connors)

Career Satisfaction High Among Private School Teachers

Private school teachers are more satisfied than their public school counterparts with careers, classroom conditions, and school climate, according to a groundbreaking report released May 20 by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

The report, titled *Free to Teach: What America's Teachers Say About Teaching in Public and Private Schools*, draws on data from the 2003-04 Schools and Staffing Survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics at the U.S. Department of Education.

"These are eye-opening data on how America's public and private school teachers view their work and their schools," said Greg Forster, one of the authors of the study.

"The results here highlight the professional differences felt by teachers from public and private schools," said Christian D'Andrea, the

mance standards for students (40 percent v. 18 percent), curriculum (47 percent v. 22 percent), and discipline policy (25 percent v. 13 percent)."

- "Public school teachers are much more likely to report that student misbehavior (37 percent v. 21 percent) or tardiness and class cutting (33 percent v. 17 percent) disrupt their classes, and are four times more likely to say student violence is a problem on at least a monthly basis (48 percent v. 12 percent)."

- "Private school teachers are much more likely to strongly agree that they have all the textbooks and supplies they need (67 percent v. 41 percent)."

- "Public school teachers are twice as likely as private school teachers to agree that the stress and disappointments they experience at their schools are so great that teaching there isn't really worth it (13 percent v. 6 percent)."

Sotomayor and Religious Schools

Sonia Sotomayor, who, if confirmed by the Senate, would be the third woman and first Hispanic to sit on the U.S. Supreme Court, serves as yet another powerful reminder of the role played by urban religious schools in developing citizens who make significant contributions to public life.

In announcing his first Supreme Court nominee, President Obama, himself a private school graduate with a similar up-from-poverty story, recalled her "extraordinary journey." Sotomayor was born in the South Bronx and raised in a housing project. As Obama put it, Sonia's mom "sent her children to a Catholic school called Cardinal Spellman out of the belief that with a good education here in America all things are possible." Sotomayor then "earned scholarships to Princeton, where she graduated at the top of her class, and Yale Law School, where she was an editor of the Yale Law Journal."

Judge Sotomayor has served on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit since 1998. Before that she served on the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, a position to which she was nominated in 1992 by President George H.W. Bush.

Located in Bronx, NY, Cardinal Spellman High School was founded in 1959, making this its 50th year in existence. The school currently serves 1355 students, most of whom are black or Hispanic. According to the school's Web site, Judge Sotomayor was a guest speaker two years ago at the school's Career Day. "Her inspirational presentation to the student body that day made all present realize what a truly exceptional woman she is." School officials note, "All members of the Spellman family, both present and past students, faculty, staff, and alumni, are extremely proud of this most notable and prestigious Spellman graduate."

% of teachers who strongly agree with the following statements

	Public	Private
I receive a great deal of support from parents for the work I do.	16%	42%
I am generally satisfied with being a teacher at this school.	59%	74%
There is a great deal of cooperative effort among the staff.	41%	60%
Most of my colleagues share my beliefs and values about what the central mission of the school should be.	38%	63%

report's co-author. "While public school teachers are faced with more hassles inside and outside the classroom, private school teachers have much more freedom to teach. These private school teachers report having better working environments and stronger networks of staff support."

According to the report's executive summary...

- "Private school teachers are much more likely to say they will continue teaching as long as they are able (62 percent v. 44 percent), while public school teachers are much more likely to say they'll leave teaching as soon as they are eligible for retirement (33 percent v. 12 percent) and that they would immediately leave teaching if a higher paying job were available (20 percent v. 12 percent)."

- "Private school teachers are much more likely to have a great deal of control over selection of textbooks and instructional materials (53 percent v. 32 percent) and content, topics, and skills to be taught (60 percent v. 36 percent)."

- "Private school teachers are much more likely to have a great deal of influence on perfor-

- "Public school teachers are almost twice as likely to agree that they sometimes feel it is a waste of time to try to do their best as a teacher (17 percent v. 9 percent)."

- "Nearly one in five public school teachers has been physically threatened by a student, compared to only one in twenty private school teachers (18 percent v. 5 percent)."

Better Working Conditions

Among the report's conclusions: "Private school teachers consistently report having better working conditions than public school teachers across a wide variety of measurements. Most prominently, private schools provide teachers with more classroom autonomy, a more supportive school climate, and better student discipline."

"Documenting existing teacher working conditions is a first step in helping the nation's educational system—both private and public schools—improve working conditions and the overall profession," said Robert Enlow, president and CEO of the Friedman Foundation.

The report is available as a PDF document at <http://www.friedmanfoundation.org>.

Return service requested

CAPE notes

★ Fast Facts About Private Schools: The National Center for Education Statistics on May 28 released *The Condition of Education 2009*. Indicator 5 in the document deals with private school enrollment and reads in part as follows:

“Private school enrollment in prekindergarten through grade 12 increased from 5.9 million in 1995 to 6.3 million in 2001, and then decreased to 5.9 million in 2007. About 11 percent of all elementary and secondary school students were in private schools in 2007.

“Between 1995 and 2003, Roman Catholic schools maintained the largest share of total private school enrollment, but the percentage of all private school students enrolled in Roman Catholic schools decreased from 45 percent in 1995 to 39 percent in 2007. This decrease stemmed from the decline in the percentage of these students enrolled in parochial schools (those run by a parish, not by a diocese or independently). In contrast, the percentage of students in Conservative Christian schools increased from 13 to 15 percent of all private school students between 1995 and 2007. The percentage of students enrolled in nonsectarian schools increased from 20 to 22 percent during this period.”

★ Iowa Governor Chet Culver last month signed legislation that would expand the state’s tax credit scholarship program by making the credits available to corporations. Back in 2006, the state established a program allowing individuals

to take a tax credit equal to 65 percent of a donation to a school tuition organization. Such organizations award individual scholarships to enable children from low- and moderate-income families to attend private schools. Under the amended law, corporations can now take the tax credit for their own contributions to scholarship funds. The amended law specifies that up to 25 percent of the \$7.5 million available for tax credits may be distributed to corporations. The additional eligibility of corporations will expand the number of students benefiting from the program.

★ Also on the corporate tax credit front, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer last month signed legislation allowing corporations to take a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for donations to organizations that provide private school scholarships to children in foster care and children with special needs. The new tax credits counteract the recent decision by the State Supreme Court disallowing voucher programs designed to help the same groups of children. John Schilling, the interim president of the Alliance for School Choice, described the new law as “a lifeline to the students whose educations were endangered.”

★ One by one, some of the nation’s top researchers on school choice took the microphone at a National Press Club briefing May 28 and presented their findings on the benefits of providing parents choice when it comes to their child’s education.

Patrick Wolf, a professor at the University of Arkansas and the principal investigator of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program and the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, offered key findings from studies of both the Milwaukee and Washington initiatives. One finding from the Milwaukee study is that the competition sparked by the voucher initiative has led to improvements in the academic performance of students remaining in the city’s public schools. In Washington, students who were offered scholarships “had significantly higher levels of reading achievement than students not offered a scholarship.”

Thomas Stewart, founder and CEO of Qwaku & Associates, a research design and program evaluation firm, reported on a study on how the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) has affected the lives of participating families. One finding: “Parents are overwhelmingly satisfied with the DC OSP because they believe that it provides them with better opportunities for their children’s academic and social development that will lift them out of poverty.”

Other presenters included Jay P. Greene, head of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, and Russ Whitehurst, director of the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution.

The event was hosted by the Black Alliance for Educational Options, the Greater Washington Urban League, and the Alliance for School Choice.