

Council for American Private Education

# CAPE outlook

Voice of America's private schools

## Education Secretary Meets with Private School Leaders

Acknowledging a strong personal connection with private education, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan met twice with religious and independent school leaders last month—first with CAPE's board of directors September 21 and then, the following day, with attendees at a private school leadership conference sponsored by the Education Department's Office of Non-Public Education (ONPE).

"I am a product of a phenomenal private school," Duncan said at the ONPE event. "And a big reason why I went into education is that I knew every day growing up how lucky my sister and brother and I were to go to an extraordinary school."

Striking a similar theme at the CAPE meeting, the secretary said he had "tremendous respect" for the schools that CAPE represents—schools that collectively do "an extraordinary job of educating children around the country."

### Great Schools

Repeating a message he has delivered before, Duncan said at the ONPE meeting that the country needs "more great schools," whether public, faith-based, or independent. He noted that people sometimes like to pit public schools against private schools, but called such conflicts and distinctions "absolutely artificial." His goal, he said, is to provide every child in the country the chance to go to a great school "and follow their dreams to the next level."

At the CAPE meeting, Irene McHenry, president of CAPE's board and executive

director of the Friends Council on Education, set the tone for the session by expressing hope that the conversation would touch on ways to "ensure that independent and religious schools are working together with public schools toward the common

good." She reminded Secretary Duncan that many private school graduates engage in a life of serving the common good, citing the secretary, Vice President Biden, President Obama, and many members of Congress as prominent examples. She also quoted the secretary's own words to explain why so many graduates choose a life of service to others. In a piece published in the *Chicago Sun-Times* in 2008 about his education at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, Duncan wrote, "So much of the Lab

Schools' culture helped shape my philosophy....Academic achievement and intellectual curiosity were really fostered....The diversity and commitment to helping others are so important. That is why you see so many alums go into public service. We were given a gift, and it's our responsibility to give that gift to others."

### Good for Students

Dr. Philip Patterson, president of the National Christian School Association, reviewed for the secretary how private schools are good for students, families, and America, achieving high graduation rates, spectacular college-going rates, and great success with minority students—and doing so at tremendous savings to taxpayers, an estimated \$50 billion annually.

Patterson also observed that the classrooms he visits tend to be more diverse and less segregated than neighborhood public schools. Asked by Duncan why that would be the case, a board member responded that private schools tend to draw students across various district and attendance lines, while many public schools tend to enroll students from immediate neighborhoods, which often tend to be segregated racially or ethnically.

### Accountability and Independence

Patrick Bassett, president of the National Association of Independent Schools, explained that accountability and independence are central values for private education. Private schools are not only accountable to parents, but also to other communities. They use a variety of data, including results from standardized tests, to demonstrate student performance. Bassett said the government's own studies show the success that religious and independent schools have in preparing students for college and civic engagement.

Independence from excessive government control, said Bassett, allows private schools to define their own mission, set standards for high-quality teachers, and engage in entrepreneurial innovation. He suggested that the freedom private schools enjoy might well serve public education.

### Urban Schools

Turning to the impact of private schools on inner-city neighborhoods, Karen Ristau, president of the National Catholic Educational Association, and Brian Simmons, president of the Association of Christian Schools International, relayed in moving detail several stories of the success that religious schools are having in providing children from disadvantaged communities with the chance for success in school and life. Ristau said the sustain-

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Education Secretary Duncan meets with CAPE's board September 21, 2010.

# 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  
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  
33 Affiliated State Organizations

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

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ability of urban religious schools is one of the greatest challenges facing the private school community. She invited the secretary to visit some urban religious schools and to publicly acknowledge their accomplishments and contributions to the well-being of all children.

Secretary Duncan said that when he headed Chicago's public schools, he was a "huge fan" of the city's archdiocesan schools and was greatly troubled by their decline. Knowing the value of those schools to the community, he said he begged church officials to turn the schools that were struggling financially into public charter schools—a move that would double their per-student revenue.

Members of CAPE's board described for the secretary the moral dilemma involved in sacrificing a school's religious mission, which is its core purpose and identity, for the sake of maintaining a secular institution in the community. They noted that an alternative to charters would be opportunity scholarships, which would allow financially troubled schools to retain both their mission and presence.

## Thought-Provoking Meeting

At ONPE's annual private school leadership conference the following day, Secretary Duncan called the meeting with the CAPE board "thought-provoking" and said he wanted to continue to work with the private school community and find ways for the Department of Education to be a good partner with private education.

Responding to an audience member who asked what he could do to help ensure a thriving private education sector in this country, Duncan said he is trying to create a national conversation about improving education in general and making it not only a civil rights issue, but also an issue of economic and national security. His goal, he said, is to improve the level of investment in education in all its forms.

## ESEA Reauthorization

On the reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, the secretary said he and his staff continue to work with education leaders in the House and Senate on both sides of the aisle to develop a proposal. He expressed hope that the process would yield a product in

early 2011.

For a questioner who expressed concerns about whether the adoption of common core standards and assessments would be a condition for private school participation in ESEA programs, he had two words of advice: "Stop worrying." Forcing private schools to implement the standards or participate in the assessments has "never been part of the conversation," he said.

## Possible Changes

Asked what his team is proposing to improve equitable services under ESEA for students in religious and independent schools, Duncan said department officials want to allow states to be "much more flexible" regarding the distribution of services to private school students. He said that

such flexibility would be a "big win."

The secretary also said that department staff are having "internal debate and thoughtful conversations" about the set-asides that public school districts are currently allowed to take under Title I before determining the share of funds available for serving private school students. He said they are trying to think through the set-aside issue "very, very carefully."

The secretary also addressed the possible impact that an increase in competitive (as opposed to formula) grants might have on private school students. An audience member explained that public school district officials sometimes write and submit grants without the required involvement of private school officials. Duncan characterized that description as a "really fair critique," and said that while he did not have an easy answer, he did hear the concern.

The secretary urged audience members who might have suggestions about improving ESEA to offer them to department officials very soon.



Education Secretary Duncan addresses private school leaders September 22, 2010. (Photo: Paul Wood, U.S. Department of Education)

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## “Waiting for Superman” Sparks National Debate

The release last month of “Waiting for Superman,” a documentary by Davis Guggenheim about the sorry state of education in some urban areas, sparked a national discussion on how best to set students free from the devastating cycle of chronically poor-performing schools. Some proposals involved expensive or unproven far-off solutions, while others centered on low-cost, tried and true, here and now approaches such as opportunity scholarships, which could provide thousands of low-income students in failing schools the opportunity right away to attend religious and independent schools with a proven record of academic success.

In an exchange on NBC’s “The Today Show,” audience member Kelly Burnett asked President Obama whether his daughters would get the same “high-quality, rigorous education” in a DC public school that they get at Sidwell Friends School. The president candidly responded that they would not. And although his assessment ruffled a few feathers in the DC region, it was largely seen as a straightforward statement of the obvious. Sidwell was among the scores of schools that participated in the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program, which, since its start in 2004, has allowed thousands of low-income children to escape failing public schools and receive a private education.

The president went on to note in his response to Ms. Burnett that while there are some great public schools in DC and other cities, getting into them could require some maneuvering or a lucky pick in a lottery. And in an exchange with host Matt Lauer about “Waiting for Superman,” Obama described as “heartbreaking” scenes in which the opportunity for students to attend a quality school was determined by the luck of the draw. “It’s obviously difficult to watch, to see these kids who know that this school’s going to give them a better chance—that that should depend on the bounce of a ball,” he said.

### Words and Actions

School choice supporters used the president’s interview to draw a distinction between the administration’s words and actions in connection with the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP). In a piece published soon after

the interview, *Washington Post* editorialist Jo-Ann Armao wrote that the president’s words called to mind the 216 parents in DC who were awarded scholarships in 2009 that their children would have used to attend private schools “had the Obama administration not cut the legs out from under the...program.” Those scholarships—and the chance they carried for a brighter future—were rescinded after Congress decided, with the administration’s blessing, to stop funds for any new students. Armao observed, “Lucky for Obama that director Davis Guggenheim wasn’t around to film the 216 parents when their hopes were



snatched away.”

A study released last June by the U.S. Department of Education found that students who attended private schools using opportunity scholarships had a 21 percent higher high-school graduation rate than a control group of comparable students.

In its first two years, the DC OSP saw 5,818 applicants, though it only had enough funds to serve approximately 1,700 to 2,000 students annually. Besides directly providing many students the chance for a promising future, the program also leveraged broader benefits. Through the infusion of new voucher students, it allowed schools that might otherwise close on account of borderline enrollments to continue serving their non-voucher students, preventing their possible transfer to public schools. One can only guess at the savings to taxpayers that was realized. The program also allowed those schools to remain as institutional anchors in their communities while maintaining their religious identity and mission.

On her September 24 show about the “Superman” documentary, Oprah Winfrey hosted Newark’s Mayor Cory A. Booker and New Jersey’s Governor Chris Christie, both huge supporters of New Jersey’s version of opportunity scholarships. Less than a week after the Oprah appearance, Christie included a scholarship proposal in a broad plan for education reform in his state. When fully implemented, the *Opportunity Scholarship Act* would allow as many as 19,000 children to leave poor-performing public schools to attend either better public schools or private schools. “We cannot continue to ask children and families stuck in chronically failing public schools to wait any longer,” Christie said.

## Neighborhood Anchors

What happens to inner-city neighborhoods when religious schools close? A new study out of Notre Dame Law School paints the story in stark detail, and the picture isn’t pretty.

Focusing on the impact of Catholic schools in Chicago, the study sidesteps the issue of educational outcomes, which are already well documented, and instead examines the schools’ effects on the quality of life in the surrounding communities. “We find strong evidence that Catholic elementary schools are important generators of social capital in urban neighborhoods. Our study suggests that neighborhood social cohesion decreases and disorder increases following an elementary school closure,” according to an abstract of the legal studies paper.

Asking what urban Catholic schools mean to their neighborhoods, the paper concludes that “they mean a great deal.” In sum, they are “important sources of neighborhood social capital in the poor urban communities that arguably need it the most.” Specifically, “They appear to suppress social disorder, increase social cohesion, and bolster collective efficacy in these neighborhoods—all findings strongly suggesting that residents’ quality of life decreases when a school closes.”

In a letter to members of Congress, the authors, Margaret F. Brinig and Nicole Stelle Garnett, note that over 1,600 Catholic schools, most of them urban, have closed over the past 20 years, and the trend is continuing. “These schools are an endangered species,” they write. “Unless steps are taken to save them, they will be lost forever to their students and their neighborhoods.”

“Catholic Schools, Urban Neighborhoods, and Education Reform,” is available for download at [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1395676](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1395676).

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## CAPE notes

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced September 9 the names of 304 schools identified by the U.S. Department of Education as the National Blue Ribbon Schools for 2010. Schools were selected either because they dramatically improved student performance on standardized tests in reading and math or because their test scores placed them in the top ten percent of schools in the nation or state.

Fifty private schools were among the awardees this year, the maximum number of private school awards allowed. Each state's commissioner of education nominates public schools for the award, and CAPE nominates private schools.

"Our nation has a responsibility to help all children realize their full potential," Duncan said. "Schools honored with the Blue Ribbon Schools award are committed to achievement and to ensuring that students learn and succeed."

More information about the program, including the application for 2011, is available at [www.capenet.org/brs.html](http://www.capenet.org/brs.html).



Valley Christian School, San Juan Capistrano • St John Fisher School, Rancho Palos Verdes • The Nueva School, Hillsborough • The Rabbi Jacob Pressman Academy, Los Angeles • **Colorado** - Colorado Springs Christian Middle School, Colorado Springs • **Connecticut** - Our Lady Star of the Sea School, Stamford • St Aloysius School, New Canaan • St Catherine of Siena School, Trumbull • St Gregory the Great School, Danbury • St James School, Manchester • St Martha School, Enfield • St Mary School, Ridgefield • St Thomas Aquinas School, Fairfield • **Delaware** - Christ the Teacher Catholic School, Newark • **Florida** - Brandon Academy, Brandon • Christ the King Catholic School, Jacksonville • St Cecelia Interparochial School, Clearwater • **Georgia** - St John the Evangelist Catholic School, Hapeville • **Illinois** - St Giles School, Oak Park • St Josaphat School, Chicago • St Vincent de Paul school, Peoria • St Joseph School, Lockport • **Indiana** - Our Lady of the Greenwood Catholic School, Greenwood • **Kentucky** - Christian Academy of Louisville High School, Louisville • **Massachusetts** - Ste Jeanne d'Arc School, Lowell • **Maryland** - St John the Baptist School, Silver Spring • St Louis School, Clarksville • **Missouri** - St Margaret of Scotland Par-

ish School, St. Louis • Visitation School, Kansas City • **New Jersey** - Joseph Kushner Hebrew Academy, Livingston • St Ann School, Lawrenceville • **New York** - Our Lady of the Assumption School, Bronx • St Joseph School, Bronxville • **North Carolina** - Our Lady of Mercy School, Winston-Salem • St Michael the Archangel Catholic School, Cary • **Ohio** - St Ann School, Cleveland Heights • St Anselm School, Chesterland • St Christopher School, Rocky River • St Gabriel Consolidated School, Cincinnati • St Raphael School, Bay Village • St Susanna School, Mason • **Pennsylvania** - Ancillae-Assumpta Academy, Wyncote • Mary, Mother of the Redeemer School, North Wales • **Tennessee** - Overbrook School, Nashville • St Francis of Assisi Catholic School, Cordova • St Joseph School, Knoxville • St Mary's School, Oak Ridge • **Virginia** - St Ambrose Catholic School, Annandale • St Theresa School, Ashburn.

### Private School Awardees

(By State)

**Arizona** - St Theresa Catholic School Valley, Phoenix • **California** - Capistrano

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