

Council for American Private Education

CAPE outlook

Voice of America's private schools

Boehner and Lieberman Introduce D.C. Choice Bill

House Speaker John Boehner and Senator Joe Lieberman launched a high-profile effort last month to reauthorize the Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) for students in the District of Columbia, dramatically lifting prospects that the popular and successful program would continue to serve children in need.

At a new conference January 26, the day after President Barack Obama delivered his State of the Union address, both Boehner and Lieberman called on the president and Education Secretary Arne Duncan to reconsider their opposition to the program. "If they evaluate it against the standards that they have set for education reform, they will see that it is totally consistent," said Lieberman.

Boehner said he agreed with the president that education will improve the country's global competitiveness, but added, "We need to start by making America's education system itself more competitive." He said opportunity scholarships are doing that in D.C. and can do so across the country, "if we give parents a choice."

Commenting on President Obama's call for both parties to work together on legislative issues, Boehner said, "If we're serious about bipartisan education reform, then this bipartisan education bill should be the starting point."

Prominent Bipartisan Sponsors

The Senate bill (S. 206) is cosponsored by Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein (CA) along with several Republicans: Lamar Alexander (TN), Susan Collins (ME), and John Inhofe (OK). The House measure (H.R. 471), the first bill introduced by Boehner since he became speaker, is cosponsored by Democratic Representative Daniel Lipinski (IL) and Republican Representatives Trey Gowdy (SC), Duncan

Hunter (CA), Darrell Issa (CA), and John Kline (MN).

The House sponsors are significant. Issa is chairman of the House Oversight and



House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH) and Senator Joe Lieberman (I-CT) at a news conference January 26 to announce a bill to reauthorize the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. (Photo: Office of the Speaker)

Government Reform Committee, which has jurisdiction over this issue. Gowdy is chairman of the subcommittee with oversight on the District of Columbia. Kline chairs the Committee on Education and the Workforce, and Hunter chairs the subcommittee dealing with elementary and secondary education.

Popular, Successful, Cost-Effective

As part of a well-orchestrated rollout of the legislation, Representatives Issa and Gowdy coauthored an op-ed in *The Washington Examiner* calling the scholarship program popular, cost-effective, and successful. They cited polls indicating that as many as 75 percent of D.C. residents want the program to continue. They cited statistics indicating that the average cost of educating a D.C. student in public schools is \$17,600, compared to the maximum \$7,500 scholarship. And they cited a study showing that "the graduation rate among scholarship recipients is an impres-

sive 91 percent, more than 23 points over the national average for public schools and significantly higher than the 49 percent rate for D.C. public schools."

Noting that not every parent with a child in a troubled school has the resources to choose alternative schools, Issa and Gowdy said, "For thousands of children and their families who are looking for a way to end the cycle of poverty, break out of failing public schools, and receive the same kind of education that the president and many members of Congress provide for their own children, this is the right thing to do."

Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman John Kline said: "Study after study has confirmed that parents in the program are more engaged in their child's education and more satisfied with the outcomes than parents of public school children in the District. For parents in search of educational options, the program serves as a model for the country."

Gallery Guests

The night before he introduced his bill, Speaker Boehner punctuated the priority status of the legislation by inviting students, teachers, and parents from OSP-participating schools to the House gallery to attend the State of the Union address. Boehner's guests also included Cardinal Donald Wuerl, archbishop of Washington, and other supporters of the program.

One of the guest students, Lesly Alvarez, an eighth grader at Sacred Heart School and an opportunity scholarship recipient since second grade, wrote a message to Congress saying the OSP has given her "the chance to have a bright future." She asked, "Why would anyone want to take away the chance for all of the children to have a great education?"

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The Opportunity Scholarship Program was established in 2004 with enough funds to provide about 1,700 students up to \$7,500 to attend religious and independent schools. Boehner helped shepherd the measure through the House at the time as chairman of the House Education and the Workforce Committee. But despite the program's popularity and success, Congress and the Obama administration agreed in 2009 to phase it out by preventing any new students from receiving scholarships.

Provisions

The legislation introduced last month by Boehner and Lieberman would not only fund the OSP, but would also provide equal amounts of funding for D.C. public schools and D.C. public charter schools, a continuation of the three-sector approach found in the 2004 legislation.

The bill raises the current \$7,500 cap on scholarships to \$8,000 per year for elementary school students and \$12,000 for high school students. Up to one percent of the funds may be used for tutoring services to students with special academic needs. The bill also provides for a rigorous evaluation of the program by measuring parental satisfaction and school safety, and by comparing the academic performance, dropout rates, graduation rates, and college admission rates of scholarship users and public school students. Participating schools are required to administer a national norm-referenced test in reading and math to scholarship students and to report the results to parents and the Institute of Education Sciences.

The scholarships are only awarded to students who reside in the District of Columbia and whose families have incomes of up to 185 percent of the federal poverty line.

Washington Post Editorial

Within days of the bill's introduction, *The Washington Post* published a powerful editorial supporting the measure. The Post said the program "should be judged by the only criterion that matters: whether it helps children." The editorial noted that the program "fell victim to ideology" and "opposition from teachers unions"

despite the fact that "rigorous research showed encouraging progress in student achievement or that parents were overwhelmingly satisfied." Observing that "too many parents in the District still have little choice but to send their sons and daughters to failing schools," the Post asked, "If Congress is willing to give them an alternative, at no cost—in fact, at great benefit—to traditional and charter schools, what's the argument against?"

Boehner's Determination

Boehner and his staff are determined to reinstate the program. Given the speaker's deep personal commitment and the backing of key Republican leaders, the bill seems almost certain to pass the House. It could also play a role in a broader bipartisan compromise with the Senate and the administration on any number of policy issues. The bottom line is that the bill's prospects



House Speaker John Boehner poses with parents, students, and supporters of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program whom he invited to the State of the Union address January 25. (Photo: Office of the Speaker)

for enactment have risen dramatically with the speaker's resolute involvement.

At his news conference, Boehner noted that the country already has competition and parent choice in higher education. Pell grants allow low-income families to use "federal funds to choose a college or university that best fits their child's needs," he said. "There's only one program in America where the federal government allows parents from lower-income families to choose the schools that are best for their children, and it's right here in D.C." Boehner went on to say that the D.C. program "provides a model that I believe can work well in other communities around the nation—it should be expanded, not ended."

Boehner called on the Obama administration to "assure the children, teachers, and parents of this city that this successful program will be allowed to continue, and work with us to make it a model for similar programs throughout our country."

The speaker's plea was echoed by Senator Lieberman: "To me, the opportunity scholarship program is a civil rights program, because making the promise of a good education available to all of our children today really is the front lines of the civil rights movement." He asked the president "to take another look" at the program.

Research Demonstrates Benefits of School Choice

The first-ever National School Choice Week (January 23-29) brought a host of celebratory events to cities across the country, including the nation's capital. One highlight in Washington was a forum January 26 sponsored by the Heritage Foundation and the Alliance for School Choice. Titled “**The Truth About School Choice: Research, Trends and More**,” the event featured noted education researcher Dr. Patrick Wolf, a professor in the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas.

Wolf reviewed the research related to school choice and came up with several salient findings. The first is that voucher programs overwhelmingly serve disadvantaged students. Of the nine tax-credit scholarship programs across the country (three in Arizona, and one each in Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island), eight are means-tested and the ninth is limited to students with disabilities. And among the 10 government-funded voucher programs, five focus on students with disabilities (Florida, Georgia, Ohio, Oklahoma, Utah), four are means-tested (Cleveland, District of Columbia, Milwaukee, and New Orleans), and one is limited to students from public schools that are in need of improvement (Ohio). “At least 38 percent of students served by government voucher programs have disabilities, compared to 15 percent of public school students,” Wolf reported.

He drilled down even further in analyzing the recipients of scholarships in the D.C. program. Ninety percent were African American and 9 percent Hispanic, with an average family income of \$17,356. And as for the program's success, it managed to boost high school graduation rates by 21 percentage points, with scholarship users graduating at a rate of 91 percent, compared to 70 percent for the control group.

Positive Competitive Effect

On the question of whether voucher programs have a positive competitive effect on the achievement of students in traditional public schools, Wolf reported results from 14 studies. Six of them found that programs in Florida had positive competitive effects, and the same was

true for five studies on the voucher program in Milwaukee. Three studies of programs in other jurisdictions yielded either positive or no effects.

Wolf also explored the benefits of school choice on parents and found, not surprisingly, that “voucher programs increase parental satisfaction with schools.” Parents are particularly happy with “curriculum, safety, parent-teacher relations, academics, and religion.” In the District of Columbia, 78 percent of voucher parents graded their schools A or B after four years of participating in the program.



Dr. Patrick Wolf speaks at the Heritage Foundation January 26, as moderator Lindsey Burke from Heritage looks on. (Photo: Charlie Geer for the Heritage Foundation)

And it turns out that students, schools, and families aren't the only beneficiaries of school choice. States and localities benefit as well. “Vouchers cost states 30 to 50 percent of regular per-pupil funding,” reported Wolf, and “with no capital costs.”

Choice programs also advance civic values, with studies showing strong evidence that choice schools are better at promoting political tolerance, voluntarism, and political knowledge than traditional schools.

Wolf summarized his findings this way: “Choice programs disproportionately serve disadvantaged students. They deliver a variety of educational benefits to students under most circumstances. They tend to spur affected public schools to improve. Parents love them. They deliver education more efficiently and tend to enhance and not undermine the public purposes of education.” Not a bad set of outcomes for any education reform initiative.

School Choice Yearbook

Another speaker at the forum, Andrew Campanella, editor of the *School Choice Yearbook*, provided an insider's preview of the upcoming 2010-11 edition. The statistics are eye-opening. Across the country, 20 government-established private school choice programs currently exist, including 11 voucher programs and nine tax-credit scholarship programs. Six of the voucher programs focus on students with special needs, as does one of the tax-credit scholarship programs.

The number of students enrolled in all choice programs has grown by leaps and bounds over the past 10 years from 29,000 students in 2000 to over 190,000 today.

NAEP Science

Twenty-nine percent of eighth-grade students in public schools scored at or above the “proficient” level in science, compared to 44 percent of private school students. At the fourth-grade level, the share of students designated proficient on the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was 32 percent for public schools and 48 percent for private schools.

When the **NAEP science report** was released January 25, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said the results “show that our nation's students aren't learning at a rate that will maintain America's role as an international leader in the sciences.” He added, “Our nation's long-term economic prosperity depends on providing a world-class education to all students, especially in mathematics and science.”

Besides reporting the percentage of students at or above certain levels of performance, the NAEP report also provides scores on a scale of 0 to 300, with a mean of 150. According to the NAEP report, at grade 4, “The average science score for students attending public schools (91 percent of fourth-graders) was 14 points lower than the overall score for students attending private schools.” The score for public school students was 149, while private school students scored 163.

At grade eight, the average score for private school students (164) was also higher than that of public school students (149).

In remarks at the release of the report, Jack Buckley, commissioner at the National Center for Education Statistics, said the 2009 assessment “was based on a new framework that emphasized four science practices: identifying science principles, using science principles, using scientific inquiry, and using technological design.” The framework covers life science, physical science, and Earth and space sciences.

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CAPE notes

★ CAPE's recent webinars with state CAPE representatives revealed a rich variety of school choice initiatives playing out in a host of states. Some examples: A state Senate committee in New Jersey approved an opportunity scholarship bill January 20, clearing the way for a full Senate vote. In Pennsylvania, supporters rallied at the state capitol behind Senate Bill 1, a measure backed by Governor Tom Corbett that would create an opportunity scholarship program for low-income students and expand the current Educational Improvement Tax Credit program by \$25 million. Virginians are getting ready for their own rally February 10 behind HB 2314, a bill backed by Governor Bob McDonnell to establish a tax credit program for corporations that contribute scholarship money to help low-income students attend religious and independent schools. In his state of the state address January 11, Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels said the state should allow families who cannot find the right public school for their child to "apply dollars that the state spends on their child to the non-government school of their choice." Arizona Governor Janice Brewer unveiled a new Web site, <arizona-schoolchoice.com>, to help parents select the right school (private, public, charter, homeschool) for their children. And in Maryland, state money for the purchase of textbooks used by private school students can now be used to purchase online courseware.

★ By every indication, the first National School Choice week (January 23-29) was a rousing success. According to organizers, over 150 events were held in 40 states yielding a significant amount of news coverage. Ten governors officially recognized the week. One highlight included a telephone press conference interview by MSNBC analyst Michelle Bernard with entertainer and educator Bill Cosby, who gave his support to the week, saying, "Parents deserve more choices."

★ Students participating in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) were significantly more likely to receive high school diplomas than students in the city's public schools (MPS), according to a new report by University of Minnesota Professor John Robert Warren.

After comparing graduation rates of students who used vouchers to attend private schools with those who attended public schools, the study (available at <http://www.schoolchoicewi.org>) concludes, "Overall, had MPS graduation rates equaled those for MPCP students in the classes of 2003 through 2009, the number of MPS graduates would have been about 18 percent higher." That higher rate would have meant 3,939 more public school graduates during the period and would have yielded considerable economic benefit. Specifically, "A recent analysis of the economic impact of high school dropouts suggests that the annual impact from

an additional 3,939 MPS graduates would include an additional \$24.9 million in personal income and about \$4.2 million in extra tax revenue."

★ StudentsFirst, established recently by Michelle Rhee, former chancellor of D.C. Public Schools, to mobilize citizens behind school reform, released its **policy agenda** last month, and school choice plays an important role. According to the document: "StudentsFirst will stand for parental choice, recognizing that we can only increase the scale of quality schools through a mix of strategies. Parents must be empowered to place their children in the learning environment that will work best for them, in a high-quality traditional public school, a district-run magnet, a charter school, a private school, or even a virtual school. StudentsFirst will be agnostic about school choice vehicles as long as the schools deliver results for students."

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