

Council for American Private Education

CAPEoutlook

Voice of America's private schools



Senator Scott Sponsors Capitol Hill Forum on Choice

United States Senator Tim Scott (R-SC), one of Capitol Hill's most active and ardent advocates for school choice, sponsored a full-day forum February 9 to discuss what his office described as "the urgency of promoting academic excellence for every child, regardless of family income, socioeconomic status or background."

Titled "Choosing Excellence," the event, sponsored in partnership with the American Federation for Children and the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, featured a stellar lineup of elected officials and experts, all encouraging an expansion of the ability of parents to choose their child's school. Featured speakers included Senate HELP Committee Chairman Lamar Alexander, House Republican Conference Chairwoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers, Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, former U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige, and of course, Senator Scott himself.

Power of Education

Raised by a single mom under challenging circumstances, Senator Scott told the assembly of parents, students, and supporters of choice that his years in school taught him "the power of education," which he said is truly "the power of freedom." Continuing the freedom theme, Scott said his "Opportunity Agenda," a suite of legislative proposals aimed at helping Americans improve their lives, is largely dedicated to "setting captives free" and ensuring that "every child everywhere has the chance to succeed."

Without choice, said Scott, parents can-

not secure for their children the education necessary for their success, achievement, and significance. "And so the issue of school choice for me is part of my DNA."

Scott is chief sponsor of the "CHOICE Act" (S. 265), which would increase educational opportunities for military families, children with disabilities, and children eligible for opportunity scholarships in the District of Columbia.



Senator Tim Scott smiles for a selfie at the forum. (U.S. Senate photo)

mine their outcomes as an adult," adding that too often that's exactly what happens in this country. "We have a reverse means testing in education. If you don't have the resources, you're more than likely to be trapped in a failing school. That's the opposite of what we are supposed to be doing."

"Every child is different," said Jindal, and when it comes to selecting a school where a child will thrive, "the people who know best are the moms and dads."

Reflecting on the education reform agenda in his state, Jindal said "the single most important thing we did is let the dollars follow the kids."

Reverse Test

Continuing to cement his credentials within the choice community, Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal said, "The circumstances of a child's birth should not deter-

Also speaking at the forum was Sr. John Mary Fleming, executive director for the Secretariat of Catholic Education at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and a member of CAPE's board. Talking about how Catholic schools differ from charter schools and public schools, Fleming said they "offer Jesus Christ preached in the Gospel." She went on to say that Catholic education concerns itself with two dimensions: the here and now, and the eternal, striving to prepare students to be citizens of this world as well as the world to come.

Weak and Unwilling

Dr. Steve Perry, founder and CEO of Capital Preparatory Schools, argued that one of the biggest challenges the school choice movement faces is not its adversaries, who want to defend the status quo, but its advocates, who are "weak and unwilling to fight." His message for choice proponents was harsh and direct: "If you're not willing to fight, then get out of the way, because there's a fight going on."

Perry said if people support Section 8 housing or food stamps or Medicare or any

program that provides public money for private goods and services, then they essentially support vouchers. He pointed out the inconsistency between supporting the use of federal funds to help send children to Brigham Young University or the University of Notre Dame while opposing a voucher for use in, say, Notre Dame High School.

"We need to do a better job of making it plain to the community what's really what," he said.



Sr. John Mary Fleming and Dr. Steve Perry discuss parent choice at the forum. (U.S. Senate photo)

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Senator Looks at Past, Present, and Future of Choice

U.S. Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN) has a long and distinguished memory lane to wander when he wants to. Having served as governor of Tennessee, U.S. secretary of education, and president of the University of Tennessee, the third-term senator, who now chairs the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, has plenty of prestigious places to visit when he wants to journey back in time.

At the Brookings Institute on February 4, Senator Alexander led listeners through a particularly rich segment of his prominent past: the one relating to school choice. He recalled, for instance, that back in 1984, when he was governor, he spoke about the “deep ruts into which

American K through 12 education had fallen,” one of those being “the lack of school choice.” In 1992, as education secretary under President George H.W. Bush, Alexander promoted the “GI Bill for Children,” which would have provided scholarships to middle- and low-income students to attend the public or private school of their choice.

Back then, said the senator, the Carnegie Foundation reported that 28 percent of parents across the country wanted to send their child to a different school. Today, 64 percent would do so if family finances allowed.

Not a New Idea

“Allowing students to choose among schools is not a new idea for the federal government,” Alexander said. He recalled that in 1944, the GI Bill “allowed veterans to choose among all colleges, public or private.” Even today, taxpayers spend “about \$136 billion a year in federal grants or loans that continue to follow students to the college or university of their choice.” He added, “Most people think that’s worked pretty well and helped to produce the competition and choices that have created the best system of colleges and universities in the world.”

Moving from universities to childcare, the senator said, “Just last year Congress re-authorized the \$2.4 billion Childcare and Development Block Grant Program, which when combined with other federal and state funding, helps approximately 900,000 families pay for childcare of their choice while they work or attend school, mostly through vouchers.”

Pointing out the success and popularity of these programs, the senator asked, “So why is it so hard to apply the same sorts of choices to elementary and secondary schools if we’re so enthusiastic about choices at the childcare end and choices at the higher education end?”

“What can the federal government do now to expand the opportunity that parents have to choose the most appropriate school for their children?” The senator had a number of answers to his own question. His first was that Congress should enact legislation, which he himself introduced last year, that would convert \$24 billion in current federal education spending to allow states “to create \$2100 scholarships to follow

11 million low-income children to any public or private school of their choice.” He also suggested that Congress should enact Senator Tim Scott’s CHOICE Act, which would expand school choice for children with disabilities, children from military families, and children in the District of Columbia. Finally, he proposed growing “the federal investment in expanding and replicating high quality charter schools with a demonstrated record of success.”

Hard, Mean, and Bloody

Suggesting that advancing school choice has never been a stroll in the park, the senator recalled that back in 1984, Ross Perot told him, “Changing the public schools of Texas was the hardest, meanest, bloodiest thing I’ve ever tried to do.”

“It looks like it may be a while before school choice will be a matter of history,” said the senator, “but the progress so many have made is impressive.”

He ended his remarks with a question: “If we trust parents to choose childcare for their children, and if we trust them to help their children choose a college to attend, and both these systems have been so successful and are so widely supported, then why do we not also trust parents to choose the best elementary and high school for their children?”

A video of the Brookings event is available at www.brookings.edu/events/2015/02/04-school-choice-lamar-alexander.



Senator Lamar Alexander responds to a question at the Brookings Institution. (image from Brookings video)

What Private School Officials Think of Choice Programs

With school choice programs across the country growing by leaps and bounds, a team of researchers from the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas thought it a good idea to look at what private school leaders thought about these programs. After all, the views of a school administrator heavily determine whether the school participates in the program or not, and that, in turn, determines the number of slots available to would-be students.

So Brian Kisida, a senior research associate, Patrick J. Wolf, a distinguished professor, and Evan Rhinesmith, a doctoral academy fellow, set out to survey leaders of private schools in Florida, Indiana, and Louisiana. In all, 954 leaders responded, yielding what the authors describe as “the largest and most in-depth survey of its kind ever conducted.”

The findings, compiled in a report from the American Enterprise Institute titled *Views from Private Schools*, were revealing. For instance, when school leaders were asked why they participate in school choice programs, the highest rated response (selected as very important by 71 percent of respondents) was to “serve more disadvantaged students.” As one Florida leader put it, the chance to help “economically disadvantaged students gain access to a high-quality education . . . is gratifying.”

Distinguishing Characteristics

One purpose of school choice is to give parents genuine alternatives to public education. But what factors make private schools different? Leaders of schools participating in choice programs identified “religious education as the characteristic that most distinguishes them from nearby public schools,” according to the report. Other high-ranking distinguishing factors included providing a “better learning environment” and paying “more attention to students’ unique needs.”

Scholarship Amounts

Do private school leaders think scholarship amounts in state programs are high enough? Not really. As the report put it, “In all three

states, high rates of respondents reported that scholarship amounts are inadequate to cover the full cost to educate a child at their school.” Not surprisingly, when the survey asked for specific suggestions on how to improve the state’s program, “requests to increase the scholarship amount were most prevalent.”

Private school participation rates in choice programs varied from state to state. About two-thirds of private schools in Florida participate, whereas half the schools in Indiana and only a third of those in Louisiana do so. Among leaders of nonparticipating schools in Florida, 40 percent said they intended to participate in the coming year, while comparable measures were 20 percent in Indiana and 8 percent in Louisiana.

Concerns about the programs varied from state to state. For participating schools: “The top concerns for leaders in Florida regarded the stability of the program, adequacy of future voucher amounts, and possible future regulations. In Indiana and Louisiana, the top concern was possible future regulations, followed by concerns about the amount of paperwork and reports.” For nonparticipating schools, “concerns about possible future regulations were the most cited across all three states, followed by concerns about the effect of participation on schools’ independence, character, or identity.”

Recommendations

The report offered several recommendations to ensure adequate funding and to strike a balance in state scholarship programs between regulation and autonomy, including:

- “Increase the voucher amount to a level that is closer to the amount received by traditional public schools.”
- “Streamline the amount of paperwork and reports required for participation.”
- “Hold private schools accountable in ways that do not threaten their independence and autonomy.”

The authors also recommended that states not require voucher recipients to first attend public schools before becoming eligible for the program.

The report is available on the AEI Web site at <www.aei.org>.

Truthiness

Stephen Colbert came up with the word “truthiness” to characterize a claim that someone feels is true despite it being at odds with evidence, facts, or logic.

A textbook example of the term emerged in recent weeks when a lone blogger falsely claimed that a bill being considered by the U.S. House of Representatives to reauthorize the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) would “crush religious freedom,” rob religious schools of their autonomy, and force them to refrain from religiously-based counseling and mentoring.

Apparently what happened is that a first-time, careless reader of the bill took passages of text that were near each other (like “secular, neutral, and nonideological” and “private schools”) and randomly juxtaposed them in preposterous ways to mean, for example, that the activities of private schools must be secular, neutral, and nonideological.

Exemplifying Winston Churchill’s claim that a lie “gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on,” the false claims spread like wildfire through emails and social media, prompting well-meaning recipients, intent on protecting religious freedom, to urge members of Congress to stop the bill.

Responding to the frenzy, CAPE explained that the term “secular, neutral, and nonideological” is not new to the bill, but has actually been essential in ESEA’s history, and for good reason. It limits the kinds of services the *government* can provide, not what private schools themselves can provide. In fact, there has never been anything in ESEA since its start in 1965 that restricts the content of instruction in religious schools.

Still, for some, the false claim felt like it was true despite its non-compliance with facts and logic. Folks sometimes forget that truth (not truthiness) shall set us free.

Return service requested

CAPE notes

★ “All states will experience a profound increase in their elderly populations over the next decade and a half.” So begins a new report by Dr. Matthew Ladner, senior advisor for policy and research at the Foundation for Excellence in Education and senior fellow at the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice. The report, *Turn and Face the Strain*, goes on to explain that most states will not only have to cope with a higher share of senior citizens, but will also face growth in their school-age population. “An increase in the size of the elderly population places a strain on health care and pension systems, while surges in the youth population creates an increased demand for education spending.”

Ladner argues that as far as K-12 education goes, “American education must grow both substantially more effective and more cost-effective.” He says policymakers “can either preside over a managed decline of a K-12 education system that spends less and achieves less, or more optimistically one that spends less and achieves more.” He adds, “Demographic change will increasingly pressure state policymakers to seek better and less expensive K-12 education delivery systems.”

Ladner asks who should be in charge of the process of economizing education: “distant policymakers and faceless administrators or parents themselves?” His answer is to “give almost complete control of education to parents and allow them to voluntarily contract with schools and other service providers.”

★ The number of students leaving private schools for public schools in Florida seems to be declining, according to an analysis of state enrollment data by Travis Pillow of redefinED. “The total number of students leaving private schools for public schools each year has fallen by about a quarter since the 2006-07 school year,” he writes.

One factor seems to be the state’s private school scholarship programs, whose “rapid growth appears to be shoring up total private school enrollment.”

Still, “[s]tudents who leave private schools for public schools are disproportionately likely to enroll in a charter school, rather than a traditional public school,” Pillow writes.

The report (available at www.redefine-online.org) goes on to examine the interaction between charter schools and private schools across the country.

★ The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Non-Public Education (ONPE) is joining forces with the Office of Safe and Healthy Students (OSHS) “to make sure that the nonpublic school community is prepared to respond to disasters if and when they strike.”

The two offices are inviting private schools to participate in the 2015 National PrepareAthon! Days, scheduled for April 30 and September 30 this year.

Schools may register for the event and find out more about it at the [America’s PrepareAthon Web site](http://America'sPrepareAthon.com).

★ New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio last month announced changes to the city’s Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) program that are designed to allow greater access for children attending religious schools. Essentially, the changes provide religious schools more flexibility in offering religious education during hours not funded by the program.

Because UPK funds in the city go to schools, rather than parents, religious instruction is prohibited during the hours the program funds. This presents a significant challenge for religious schools.

CAPE member organization Agudath Israel of America called the mayor’s changes a “meaningful step forward” that should bring additional schools into the program, but added that “only time will tell” the extent of the impact the changes will have. The organization called on the mayor to “maintain a half-day option for those who feel they cannot accept full-day programming.”

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