

Council for American Private Education

# CAPE outlook

Voice of America's private schools

## Hope on the Rise for Students in Failing D.C. Schools

Students attending low-performing schools in Washington, D.C., got a huge shot of hope last month when House speaker-in-waiting John Boehner met with parents from the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP). An unmistakable sign of Boehner's continued strong support for scholarships, the meeting took place just two weeks after the election that swept Republicans into the House majority and two days before House GOP members selected Boehner as their leader and choice for speaker in the 112th Congress.

According to the speaker-designate's Web site, Boehner took the opportunity of the meeting to reaffirm his commitment to renewing the program. The parents thanked him for standing by their children.

In December 2009, Congress and the Obama administration agreed to phase out the D.C. program by preventing any new students from receiving scholarships. Unless the phase-out is reversed, some religious schools that participate in the OSP may very well close, denying opportunities for success not only to scholarship students, but also to the non-scholarship students those schools serve.

The program has been enormously popular among participating parents, and a government-sponsored state-of-the-art study has shown that students who attended private schools through the program were more likely, by an astounding 21 percentage points, to receive a high school diploma than a control group that did not take part in the program. Few, if any, federal programs have demonstrated comparable success in paving the way to college for low-income students. And unlike some untried and down-the-road proposals for helping students in chronically poor-performing schools, opportunity scholarships could help students right now attend

schools with a proven record of success.

The D.C. OSP provides families at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level with scholarships worth up to \$7,500 per child to attend religious and independent schools located within Washington. The program was signed into law in 2004. At the time, Boehner, who helped steer the



House Republican Leader John Boehner meets with parents and advocates of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. (Official House Republican Conference photo by Ryan Howell.)

measure through the House as chairman of the Education and the Workforce Committee, praised the legislation's passage, saying it provided "help and hope to the troubled D.C. public school system and its students."

### Support from Committee Chairs

Besides Boehner, other GOP leaders seem ready to promote opportunity scholarships in the 112th Congress. Alexa Marro, a spokesperson for Rep. John Kline (R-MN), the likely next chairman of the Education and Labor Committee, told the *Washington Times* that Kline "is very focused on restoring the program." She added that Rep. Darrell Issa (R-CA), incoming chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, which deals with issues relating to the District of Columbia, is also a strong OSP supporter.

Both Kline and Issa were cosponsors of H.R. 2556, a bill by Boehner to preserve the D.C. program, which failed to gain traction in the current Congress.

### Senate Scenario

On the Senate side, Joseph Lieberman (I-CT) introduced in the current Congress S. 1552, the *Scholarships for Opportunity and Results Act*, which had both Democratic and Republican cosponsors. The bill itself did not move, and an amendment by Lieberman to authorize funds to continue the OSP for another five years was defeated last March in the Senate by a 42-55 vote. The most recent elections could mean a pick-up of as many as seven votes for the measure, still short of the 60 votes needed to overcome a filibuster. To be enacted, an OSP extension would probably have to be included as part of a larger compromise package agreed to by the House and Senate.

### Bipartisan Cooperation

One prominent advocate for the D.C. program sees potential for cooperation on the issue between the Obama administration and members of Congress. Citing calls for collaboration on education reform, former D.C. Council member Kevin P. Chavous, told the *Washington Times*, "By taking action, reversing course, and saving the endangered D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, President Obama will rescue the educational futures of thousands of low-income children who live just blocks from the White House." He said the president would find "legions of supporters, Democratic and Republican" in Congress to work with him to advance this issue. Noting that Education Secretary Arne Duncan has called for bipartisan cooperation around education, Chavous said the D.C. OSP "is the place to start."

**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

**Outlook is published monthly (September to June) by CAPE. An annual subscription is \$35. ISSN 0271-1451**

13017 Wisteria Drive #457  
Germantown, MD 20874  
(tel) 301-916-8460  
(fax) 301-916-8485  
(email) cape@capenet.org

[www.capenet.org](http://www.capenet.org)

## Social Studies Teachers Agree on Content, Not Results

Public and private school teachers have similar views about what students should be taught in social studies but remarkably dissimilar opinions about whether their students are actually learning. They also have dramatically different assessments about the value placed on social studies and citizenship within their own schools.

The findings come from *High Schools, Civics, and Citizenship: What Social Studies Teachers Think and Do*, a report released this fall by the AEI Program on American Citizenship. The authors, Steve Farkas and Ann Duffett, essentially sought to find out “What are teachers trying to teach our youth about citizenship and what it means to be an American?” They surveyed high school social studies teachers—866 from public schools and 245 from religious and independent schools.

### Similar Goals

When asked to rank five specified priorities around the teaching of citizenship, teachers in public and private schools tended toward the same rankings. For example, similar percentages of both sets of teachers (49 percent of public school teachers and 54 percent of private school teachers) gave a first or second place ranking to “internalizing core values like tolerance and equality.” “Promoting civic behaviors such as voting and community service” was placed first or second by 49 percent of public school teachers and 44 percent of private school teachers. “Instilling good work habits” got a top-two ranking from 46 percent of public school teachers and 41 percent of private school teachers. The remaining two priorities were ranked as follows: “understanding the key principles of American government” (38 percent public, 43 percent private); “teaching key facts, dates and major events” (20 percent public, 19 percent private).

### Dissimilar Results

Are students actually grasping what is being taught in social studies? That depends on whom you ask. Private school teachers are significantly more confident than their public school peers that their students have actually learned what they are supposed to learn by the time they graduate. Have students learned to “develop habits of community service, such as volunteer-

ing and raising money for causes”? Fourteen percent of public school teachers are very confident that they have, compared to 54 percent of private school teachers. What about learning to be “tolerant of people and groups who are different from themselves”? Even though similar percentages of both groups of teachers (76 percent public and 82 percent private) believe it is “absolutely essential” that students be taught this trait, only 19 percent of public school teachers and 43 percent of private school teachers are very confident that students have in fact mastered the outcome. The differences in confidence about outcomes persist across the 12 concepts on which teachers were asked to comment (see table).

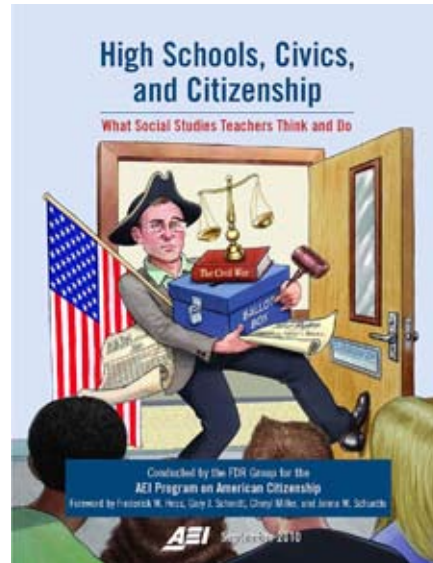
The report notes that the “confidence differential is especially stark on items pertaining to the implicit curriculum, such as teaching good work habits and respect for authority.” For example, 6 percent of public school teachers and 31 percent of private school teachers are “very confident” that students have learned “to have good work habits, such as being timely, persistent, and hard-working.”

In fact, “no more than 24 percent of public school teachers express great confidence that most of the students from their high school have actually learned [any of the 12] concepts before they graduate,” according to the report.

### Second-Tier Status for Civics

The survey suggests that the emphasis on reading and mathematics, spurred in part by the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), has served to narrow the curriculum in public schools. Most public school social studies teachers (70 percent) believe their subject has become a “lower priority because of pressure to show progress on state tests in math and language arts.” That view is shared by only 29 percent of private school teachers. Asked directly to assess the impact of NCLB on the curriculum, 45 percent of public school teachers, but only 9 percent of private school teachers, say “social studies has been de-emphasized.”

Has civics education taken a back seat in the public school curriculum? Frederick M. Hess, AEI’s director of education policy studies, seems to think so. “For all our laudable attention to



continued from page 3

reading and math in the past decade, we seem to have turned a blind eye to the crucial role schools play as shapers of character and pillars of citizenship,” he said.

### Valued by School

According to the report, “private school teachers express greater confidence [than their public school counterparts] that their subject is valued by their schools.” While 45 percent of public school teachers say social studies is treated as “an absolutely essential subject area” in their district, 68 percent of private school teachers say the same about their schools.

The report also finds that teachers in private schools enjoy much more autonomy over their coursework. “Private school teachers are almost twice as likely to report having a great deal of control over what topics they choose to cover, and how quickly they move through the curriculum (86 percent versus 45 percent).” When asked, “When you teach, do you find that you can routinely implement hands-on, project-based learning, or are there too many obstacles standing in the way?” 69 percent of private school teachers said they could routinely implement, compared to 53 percent of public school teachers.

Teachers in private schools are also “more likely to report an overall more positive school atmosphere for conveying the importance of citizenship.” Their schools are more likely to have “a community-service requirement for graduation” (82 percent versus 37 percent). Their administration is more likely to “maintain an atmosphere where the rules and the authority of adults are respected” (88 percent versus 65

percent). And their schools “encourage student involvement in student government, debates, and issues-oriented clubs and organizations” (91 percent versus 73 percent).

### Putting the Myth to Rest

Every once in a while, some folks take a not-so-subtle swipe at private schools by suggesting they are not as effective as government schools in transmitting democratic values and producing good citizens. But evidence to the contrary is overwhelming. President Obama, Vice President Biden, and numerous members of Congress attended private schools. The NAEP civics assessment, a test intended to measure, among other things, “how well American youth are being prepared to meet their citizenship responsibilities” and how well they understand the principles of democracy, shows that students in private schools score substantially above the national average. Also, more than one study has demonstrated a positive correlation between private school attendance and adult civic behavior, including the likelihood to vote. And now the AEI study suggests that private schools themselves seem to provide “a more positive school atmosphere for conveying the importance of citizenship” and that their teachers are more confident that the lessons of citizenship are actually being absorbed. It’s probably time to put the “not as effective” myth to rest.

The truth is that private schools reflect and help fulfill the American ideal of pluralism. They also do a very good job of instilling in students a love of democracy and preparing productive citizens.

The AEI report is available online at <<http://www.aei.org/paper/100145>>.

## Digital Learning for All Students

The very first principle of a new bipartisan document on digital learning is that states should ensure “access to high quality digital content and online courses to all students.” As the report explains, any student *eligible* for public education, “should be eligible for publicly funded digital learning.” In other words, actual attendance at a public school should not be a condition for access to online instruction.

Former governors Jeb Bush of Florida and Bob Wise of West Virginia released the document *Digital Learning Now* at an event in Washington, DC, December 1. The report, which touts online courses and digital content as a way to provide top-tier instruction and greater educational productivity during a time of tight government budgets, offers “Ten Elements of High Quality Digital Learning.”

Bob Wise explained digital instruction this way: “One major state has 440 high schools but only 85 physics teachers, so we are not going to be able to get a certified physics teacher in every school, but what we can do through technology is bring in high-quality physics content and now we combine that with an effective teacher in that classroom to truly get the maximum student outcomes.”

The document calls for universal access to digital content without restrictions relating to things like caps, class size, school location, or student residence. Moreover, states should allow “students to take online classes full-time, part-time or by individual course.”

“In today’s world, learning doesn’t have to start when a student enters the classroom and end when the school bell rings,” states the report. “Students can access digital learning virtually whenever and wherever they are—both physically and figuratively.”

The report is available at: <<http://excelined.org/>>.

### The Twelve Concepts of Citizenship

Percentages of teachers who say it is “absolutely essential” that students be taught the concept and who are “very confident” that students have learned the concept by the time they graduate.

Concept	Public		Private	
	Essential	Confident	Essential	Confident
Identify the protections guaranteed by the Bill of Rights	83	24	81	33
Have good work habits	80	6	80	31
Embrace the responsibilities of citizenship	78	18	74	28
Be tolerant of people and groups who are different	76	19	82	43
Understand key concepts such as federalism	64	15	74	29
Be knowledgeable about key periods in history	63	15	75	32
Follow rules and be respectful of authority	60	12	59	29
See themselves as global citizens	57	9	67	24
Understand economic principles	50	11	48	17
Develop habits of community service	43	14	67	54
Be activists who challenge the status quo	37	5	35	13
Know key facts and dates	36	7	35	19



Return service requested

## CAPE notes

★ Clearly a case can be made that students who attend private schools as a result of a state's tax credit scholarship initiative are the program's beneficiaries, but what about those students who remain in public schools? A new study published in the Winter 2011 issue of *Education Next* concludes that non-recipient public school students benefit as well.

The study looked at the impact of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program (FTC), which became law in 2001 and provides corporations with tax credits for contributions to scholarship-granting organizations. Variations of the program exist in six other states.

The study found that competition from private school choice improves public education. In fact, "students in schools that face a greater threat of losing students to private schools as a result of the introduction of tax-credit funded scholarships improve their test scores more than do students in schools that face less-pronounced threats." Further, "this improvement occurs before any students have actually used a scholarship to switch schools. In other words, it occurs from the threat of competition alone."

The study by David Figlio, professor of education, social policy and economics at Northwestern University, and Cassandra M.D. Hart, a doctoral student in the Department of Human Development and Social Policy at Northwestern, is available at <http://educationnext.org/does-competition-improve-public-schools/>.

★ Offering a global perspective on the same topic, a separate study has found that private school competition not only improves achievement for students in both public and private schools, but also lowers a nation's education-related costs. The study by Martin West, assistant professor at Harvard Graduate School of Education, and Ludger Woessmann, professor at the University of Munich, was published in the August issue of the *Economic Journal*.

"Competition from private schools improves student achievement, and appears to do so for public school as well as private school students," say the authors. "And it produces these benefits while decreasing the total resources devoted to education."

For more on the study, visit [http://www.gse.harvard.edu/blog/news\\_features\\_releases/2010/09/study-competition-from-private-schools-boosts-achievement-and-lowers-costs.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/blog/news_features_releases/2010/09/study-competition-from-private-schools-boosts-achievement-and-lowers-costs.html).

★ Numerous private schools participate in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) each year to help provide a picture of what the nation's students know and are able to do. In sync with the current emphasis on college and career readiness, the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB), which oversees NAEP, has commissioned a series of studies to find out how the grade 12 NAEP might reliably measure whether students are ready for college and the workforce. The first set of those studies compares NAEP with popular assessments already in

use as measures of college readiness, like the ACT and SAT. Want to learn more about the project and its first findings? Visit <http://www.nagb.org/commission/>.

★ Mark your calendar for January 23-29, 2011, the first ever National School Choice Week to celebrate the value of expanding educational opportunities for all children. For more information, visit <http://schoolchoiceweek.com/>.

★ The InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington has published "a handy and unique book for learning about the world's major religions." *Teaching About Religion* enlists representatives of 11 faiths to respond to questions such as: When and where was the religion founded? What takes place at a typical worship ceremony? What are the main holy days?

More information about this resource is available at <http://www.ifcmw.org/>.

### Helping Schools Help Families



  
SCHOOL & STUDENT SERVICES BY NAIS

Learn more at  
[sss.nais.org/go/cape](http://sss.nais.org/go/cape)



Comprehensive financial aid  
services for private schools.