

Council for American Private Education

CAPE outlook

Voice of America's private schools

U.S. Senate Reaffirms Parental Choice in Child Care Bill

The U. S. Senate last month reaffirmed the right of parents to choose the child care program that best meets their child's needs when it approved S. 1086, a bipartisan bill to reauthorize the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) program, which, since the 1990s, has helped low-income families pay for child care, whether in public, private, or religious settings. The vote, which took place March 13, was 96 to 2.

The bill included language proposed by the CAPE community that affirms the use of child care certificates, which are provided directly to parents for use in whatever program best suits their child: faith-based, Montessori, Waldorf, or any other public or private program.

CAPE's new issue paper on childhood development states that legislation promoting early education "should support the right of parents to choose from a range of programs, including explicitly religious programs."

Scott Amendment

Senate Amendment 2837—offered by Senator Tim Scott (R-SC), supported by Senator Mary Landrieu (D-LA), and accepted March 12 by the Senate in a voice vote—contained the language supported by CAPE. The amendment states that nothing in the statute "shall be construed in a manner (1) to favor or promote the use of grants and contracts for the receipt of child care services...over the use of child care certificates; or (2) to disfavor or discourage the use of such certificates for the purchase of child care services, including those services provided by private or nonprofit entities, such as faith-based providers."

In introducing SA 2837, Senator Scott said the amendment would clarify that the statute does not "adversely impact the use of certificates in faith-based or other settings." He added, "What we are talking

about today boils down to parental choice and state flexibility—two issues the federal government should be thinking a lot harder about on a constant basis."

A recent proposed regulation from the Administration for Children and Families sought to increase the use of grants and contracts in the CCDBG program to the disfavor of certificates. Because of constitutional prohibitions, direct grants to providers of child care in effect preclude participation by faith-based providers that incorporate religious components within their programs. Certificates, on the other hand, avoid this direct funding obstacle because they go to parents rather than institutions. Parents then decide where to use the certificates when purchasing child care services.

1.5 Million Children

CCDBG focuses on the care of children under the age of 13 while their parents work or participate in training or education programs. Allowable care includes that provided in centers or programs, or by relatives or neighbors. It does not cover the cost of compulsory schooling.

According to the Department of Health and Human Services, roughly 1.5 million children receive CCDBG assistance, and 51 percent of families served have incomes under the federal poverty level. Center-based programs enroll 68 percent of children assisted by CCDBG, while family child care homes serve another 21 percent. Ninety percent of children who benefit from CCDBG do so through the use of certificates.

Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD),

who sponsored the bipartisan bill (along with cosponsoring Senators Richard Burr (R-NC), Tom Harkin (D-IA), and Lamar Alexander (R-TN)) told colleagues during Senate consideration that the CCDBG

provides states with funding; the funding then helps "lower-income families afford child care while their parents work or train for work." Such families, she said, "are given vouchers based on their income level to

help cover the cost of care."

Senator Burr said, "Vouchers give parents the flexibility they want and need to make the best choice for their children" and "keep the decisions in the hands of parents."

Why Not K-12?

Senator Alexander, the ranking member of the Senate HELP Committee, noted that the child care bill provides vouchers for preschoolers, and Pell grants provide vouchers for college students, but a comparable mechanism does not exist for K-12 students. "Why don't we try it with kindergarten through the 12th grade?" he asked.

Noting that some opponents of K-12 vouchers consider them "un-American," Alexander said, "It is not very un-American if it is the GI bill, not very un-American if it is a Pell grant, not very un-American if it is a child care voucher, but something somehow is wrong with it if you are in third grade or the seventh grade or the ninth grade."

Before the bill becomes law, the House must act. House Education and the Work-



continued on page 2

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
- Council on Educational Standards and Accountability
- 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
- 35 Affiliated State Organizations

a coalition of national associations serving private schools K-12
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School Choice Caucus Conducts Inaugural Meeting

Congressman Luke Messer, founder and chair of the Congressional School Choice Caucus, hosted the group's inaugural meeting March 25 on Capitol Hill. He was joined by caucus colleagues and parents whose children have directly benefited by choice.

"I am a firm believer that this is the civil rights issue of this generation," said the Congressman. Access to the American dream of opportunity requires "access to a great education."

"Every cause has its time," he said, and we now have the chance to provide opportunities to parents that were "unimaginable even just a couple of years ago." Noting that school choice has largely been a state-level phenomenon, Messer said it's now time to take a look at what can be done at the federal level. "We cannot rest as a nation until every child walks into a classroom...where he has a genuine chance of learning."

A Blessing

Andrienne Lynch was one of the parents who spoke. Her three children are D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) participants. "There's no question in my mind this program

works" and "has changed our lives and our family," she said. Describing the program as a blessing, Lynch added, "I just can't see not having this program for those that are coming behind me."

Gary Jones, whose daughter is an OSP recipient, said the program allowed him to choose a school with a "strong academic history" and "faith-based values."

Rep. Todd Rokita (R-IN), a caucus member who also chairs that House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education, said, "There is a lot of bipartisan energy" around the issue of school choice.

Katherine C. Haley, chief education policy advisor to House Speaker John Boehner, attended the meeting and conveyed the speaker's strong and enthusiastic support for the caucus.

In his closing remarks, Messer cautioned that a movement like school choice takes a great deal of effort. One ingredient for success, he said, is to help policymakers realize that school choice is "something that changes lives."

The stated mission of the School Choice Caucus is "to expand educational freedom and promote policies that increase high-quality education options for all children."



Rep. Luke Messer (R-IN), center, and several parents launch the inaugural meeting of the Congressional School Choice Caucus, March 25, 2014

continued from page 1

force Committee Chairman John Kline (R-MN) called the Senate bill "a step forward in the shared goal of strengthening the nation's existing network of early childhood services."

On March 25, the House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education, chaired by Rep. Todd Rokita (R-IN), held a hearing on the CCDBG reauthorization, the first step toward House consideration.

In his opening remarks, Chairman Rokita sent strong signals about possible action in the House. "CCDBG is invaluable to parents who are struggling to provide for their families. As a father of two boys, I know firsthand child care isn't just finding a place for your kids to go during your work day. It's a far more difficult decision," he said.

Noting that the current CCDBG program "fails to ensure states develop or adequately enforce the health and safety, training, and inspection standards that are the foundation for quality

care," Rokita said that lawmakers "must take steps to strengthen the program and ensure enhanced program quality and accountability."

He said he was pleased that the Senate legislation included language that bolsters standards and requires states "to implement minimum training requirements and conduct annual inspections of licensed providers." Such provisions would "help ensure caregivers are equipped to handle common health conditions and emergency situations." He said the Senate bill "also takes important steps to enhance transparency and better inform parents of their child care options."

Setting the tone for House action, Rokita closed his comments by saying that the reauthorization of CCDBG "provides an opportunity to work together to advance bipartisan legislation that will help our nation's most vulnerable children and families." He said he was looking forward "to examining the strengths and weaknesses of the CCDBG program, and discussing opportunities for consensus."

RealClear Education Launch Covers Pressing Ed Issues

With considerable fanfare and a high-powered roster of presenters, the founders of RealClear Politics launched their latest offspring, **RealClear Education**, at a tasteful event March 12 in Washington, DC. The new Web site describes itself as “the hub for the most critical and relevant news, analysis and research in the world of education.”

Andrew J. Rotherham, executive editor of RealClear Education, described the organization’s mission as “very straightforward,” namely, to help readers cut through the clutter of information on education and “to find the best content and make it accessible.” He said the one “ideology” the site will adhere to is quality. “Evidence and analysis matter,” he said, and the links on the site, along with its original content, will reflect that.

Rotherham chaired two panels of experts at the launch event, covering topics such as Common Core standards, school accountability, pre-K, and school choice.

Kathleen Porter-Magee, senior advisor to The College Board and a policy fellow at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, covered the Common Core standards, offering an analysis of how they got started, how they developed, what they are, and what they are not. She predicted that in order to get beyond the current political blowback that the movement has generated, states will “really have to take ownership over their standards,” adapting them to meet state needs. She also said policymakers will have to “rethink assessment and accountability” and leaders will have to “not back down when the going gets tough.”

Responding to a question from the audience, Ms. Porter-Magee explained that the forthcoming redesign of the SAT will not be aligned exclusively with the Common Core, but instead will focus on the skills and abilities necessary for students to be ready for college and careers. The SAT’s broader focus even reflects standards adopted by states that have not bought into the Common Core, she said.

Anne Hyslop, policy analyst for the New America Foundation, talked about school ac-

countability and immediately grabbed everyone’s attention with the claim that as U.S. Education Secretary Arnie Duncan and state governors across the country are talking about higher expectations, “they’re simultaneously leading the most significant erosion of school accountability in 20 years.” They are doing so, she said, through No Child Left Behind waivers, which allow states to lower the number of identified



Kathleen Porter-Magee, left, Anne Hyslop, and Andy Rotherham participate in a panel discussion at the launch of RealClear Education, March 12, 2014, in Washington, DC. (Photo: RealClearEducation)

poor-performing schools in exchange for states doing more to help those that are identified improve. States, she said, “are now renegeing on their part of the bargain and the department is not enforcing it, leading to weaker accountability.”

Sara Mead, a principal at Bellwether Education Partners, brought the group up to date on policy developments in pre-K education, a hot political topic of late.

She spoke of research identifying “the critical importance of early learning for children’s later life outcomes.” Noting that “gaps in learning emerge and can be detected as early as nine-months of age,” she reported that “high-quality pre-K can make a big difference in addressing those gaps.”

Mead produced a chart indicating that about 70 percent of four-year-olds nationally and 40 percent of three-year-olds are in some type of preschool or center-based program, and roughly 30 percent of three- and four-year-olds are in programs for which their parents pay. Forty percent of four-year-olds and 12 percent of three-year-olds are in publicly funded pre-K programs, whether Head Start or state-supported programs.

The big issue, she said, is that “the quality is not good enough to prepare kids for school in most of those programs.”

Deborah McGriff, managing director at NewSchools Venture Fund, described parent choice as, “the opportunity to empower parents to select high quality schools, wherever they find them,” whether traditional public schools, charter schools, or private schools. When parents are given choice, “They know that the lives of their son or their daughter will be transformed.”

McGriff defined public education broadly as “education that is in the public interest,” a definition intended to encompass private schools.

Preschool Grants

When she met with CAPE’s board of directors and state representatives last month, Libby Doggett, deputy assistant secretary for policy and early learning at the U.S. Department of Education, urged the CAPE community to weigh in on the public discussion regarding the design of the new Preschool Development Grants competition.

The private school community responded in force, with various CAPE member organizations and CAPE itself offering comments at a public meeting March 20 and through an online forum established to solicit input.

CAPE’s comments called for the new grants program to be open to diverse approaches to early education, observing that there is “no single combination of activities, lessons, methods, and settings best suited for all children in all circumstances.”

Specifically, CAPE recommended that the federal government require as an explicit condition for receiving a grant, “that a state’s quality rating system, professional development requirements, training and credentialing requirements, curriculum guidelines, even health and safety standards respect and accommodate a variety of truly distinctive approaches to quality early education, including those practiced in Montessori programs, faith-based programs, and Waldorf programs.”

Montessori programs, which are universally recognized as a time-honored, high-quality approach to education, sometimes run into difficulties in states that insist on a one-size-fits-all approach to pre-K. State standards can undermine the pedagogy and theory of child development espoused by the Montessori community.

The competition should insist that such standards only be developed “in consultation with representatives from the diverse early education community,” said CAPE.

Return service requested

CAPE notes

★ The Arizona Supreme Court removed any doubt about the constitutionality of the state's education savings accounts (ESA) program last month by refusing to review a Court of Appeals' decision upholding the program.

"Arizona's ESA program is changing lives and improving educational outcomes for more than 700 special-needs students currently participating," said Tim Keller, executive director of the Institute for Justice Arizona Chapter and the Institute's lead attorney defending the program in court. "The Arizona Supreme Court's decision is a huge victory for the families participating in the ESA program."

The program "is a publicly-funded education savings program that gives parents more control over their special needs child's education than any other private school choice program in the country," explained Keller. The program differs from other scholarship programs "by giving parents of special-needs children a full menu of educational options in which to choose to spend the funds," he said.

Under the ESA program, the state deposits funds into accounts that parents can then spend in a variety of ways to help their children learn and develop.

"Arizona has always been a national leader in offering families educational choice," said Institute President and General Counsel William Mellor. "Today's decision finally and fully vindicates the ESA program's constitutionality. The Court of Appeals' decision now joins a growing list

of state courts, including Ohio, Wisconsin, and most recently Indiana, to vindicate the parental right to choose the educational environment that best suits their child's unique educational needs."

★ CAPE's board of directors and state representatives had a fruitful and informative meeting March 10. Libby Doggett, deputy assistant secretary for policy and early learning at the U.S. Department of Education, reviewed President Obama's sweeping proposal for early education, and Michael Petrilli, executive vice president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, talked about the Common Core state standards and their interplay with private education.

CAPE's board updated CAPE's strategic plan and also approved two new issue papers covering both ends of the education spectrum: **early childhood development** and the **reauthorization of the Higher Education Act**.

★ The American Federation for Children and the Alliance for School Choice will host their fifth annual national policy summit May 20-21 in Kissimmee, Florida.

Billed as the premiere event for strategic discussions on choice, this year's summit has the theme "#EdRevolution: Breaking Down Barriers" and will feature high-profile keynote speakers, specialized panels and the opportunity for participants to network and meet the movement's leaders.

The event will give policymakers, business leaders, and educational choice advo-

cates the chance to celebrate the phenomenal successes of school choice and discuss the movement's bright future.

Registration is open now at www.afcpolicysummit.com.

★ Indiana Governor Mike Pence signed into law the state's first funding initiative for pre-K, providing up to \$10 million for a pilot program in five counties that would allow low-income families to choose the preschool provider that best meets their child's needs, including religious providers.

At a signing ceremony at DayStar Childcare Ministry in Indianapolis on March 27, Pence said, "When it comes to helping our Hoosier kids reach their full potential, early education can make the difference between a lifetime of success and a lifetime of trying to catch up." He added, "Today is an historic moment in our state as we begin a new chapter of Indiana education to help young Hoosiers succeed in school, in the workforce, and in life."

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