

Council for American Private Education

# CAPE outlook

Voice of America's private schools

## Survey Looks at the Steps Involved in Choosing a Private School

What prompts parents to consider enrolling their children in a private school? What factors move them to settle on one particular school over another?

And what do they think about the way they are treated during the application and admission process? A comprehensive survey of over 2,300 parents who recently experienced that very process yields some fascinating and valuable results for private school officials in charge of recruiting students and families.

The survey was conducted in May and June of 2014 on behalf of the Secondary School Admission Test Board (SSATB), an organization that, according to its mission statement, is devoted to “meeting the admission assessment and enrollment needs of schools, students, and families.” Engagingly presented as a train trip that parents take from first consideration of a school, through campus tours, into the application process, and finally arriving at a decision, the survey report, titled *The Ride to Independent Schools*, captures the journey from start to finish. Positioned throughout the text are helpful markers alerting admission officials about steps they can take to make the “ride” more pleasant and successful.

### Why a Private School?

According to the report, “Parents making the choice either to start or to continue their child’s private school education are primarily seeking an education that will challenge their child and foster a love of learning.” Parents were asked how important various factors were in the decision

to apply to a private school. Ninety-seven percent said that providing an education that would challenge their child was “extremely important” or “very important.”

Other influential factors (respondents could choose more than one) included helping the child “develop and/or maintain a love of learning” (96 percent), providing “small class size/individual attention” (84 percent), helping the child “develop a strong moral character” (82 percent), helping the child’s “emotional and social development” (77 percent), and helping the child secure a “superior college placement” (74 percent).

### Who Responded?

Seventy-seven percent of respondents to the survey were mothers of the students seeking enrollment, and 22 percent were fathers, suggesting that females play a pivotal role in the school selection process. Sixty-six percent were from Generation X (35–49-year-olds), while 32 percent were from the baby-boom generation (50 or older). Seventy-four percent were parents of applicants in grades 6 to 8, with an additional 13 percent of applicants coming from grades 3 to 5, and another

13 percent from grades 9 to 11. Forty-five percent of respondents had attended private schools themselves as children.

### Stops Along the Way

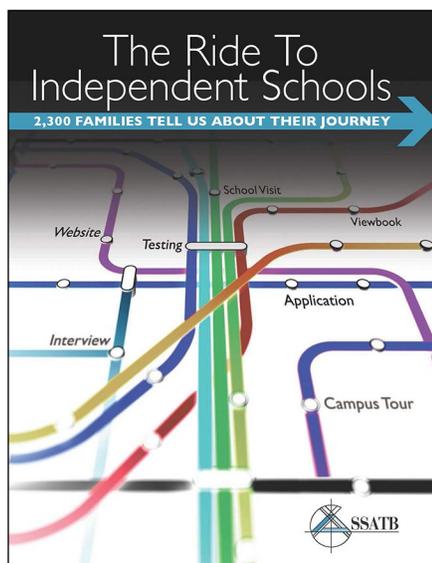
The journey toward a private school involves several phases and a lot of thought. According to the report, “Almost all parents (94%) visited at least one private school as they considered to which schools they would apply, with most visiting between one and three schools in total (57%), for an average of 2.3 school visits per family.” The visit “appears to be a linchpin” in the school selection process. Accordingly, “Admission offices must show parents that personalized care for their child’s academic success is first and foremost. The campus visit should be the ultimate experience—an exciting and warm introduction to all that you are and all that you can provide to that particular child.”

What might be improved in the admission process? “Thirty-one percent of parents seek more opportunities to interact with current students and to visit classes, as well as more information about the academic programs. Twenty-nine percent of parents sought more opportunities

to meet with teachers and faculty, and 28 percent would have liked more information about the admission process and expectations for applicants.”

The full report is available on the

SSATB Web site at [www.admission.org/professional-development/resources/parent-survey-report-2014/index.aspx](http://www.admission.org/professional-development/resources/parent-survey-report-2014/index.aspx). [pencil photo ©Ivan Kopylov/Dollar Photo Club]



### Reasons Parents Consider a Private School

- Provide an education that will challenge the child (97%)
- Help child develop/maintain a love of learning (96%)
- Small class size/individual attention (84%)
- Help child develop a strong moral character (82%)
- Help child's emotional and social development (77%)
- Help child secure superior college placement (74%)

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- 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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## Senator and Researcher Intersect at AEI Forum

The American Enterprise Institute celebrated National School Choice Week by hosting a forum described as “a bit of a twofer,” during which South Carolina Senator Tim Scott unveiled innovative school choice legislation, and University of Arkansas Professor Patrick J. Wolf discussed his recent book on how choice affects urban families.

Describing how his own academic struggles helped him “see the power of education,” Senator Scott declared, “Access to quality education is a must,” adding that it is “absolutely paramount that we act, and that we act now.”

### CHOICE Act

The senator’s bill, called the Creating Hope and Opportunity for Individuals and Communities Through Education (CHOICE) Act, would focus on children with disabilities, those who live on military bases, and students participating in the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP).

According to Scott’s office, the legislation would encourage states “to establish school choice programs for students with disabilities by providing startup funds to support the design and initial implementation of a disability choice program.” States that already have choice programs for special needs students would be able to use federal funds to expand those programs.

The component for military families would create a pilot program on five or more military bases that would offer school choice scholarships of up to \$8,000 at the elementary school level and \$12,000 at the high school level.

Finally, the OSP portion of the bill would allow carry-over funds from the program to be used to promote the DC-based initiative and provide scholarships to additional children.

Representative Todd Rokita (R-IN), chairman of the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education, introduced the CHOICE Act in the House and pledged to move it through the legislative process.

In the perfect complement to Senator Scott’s remarks, Patrick Wolf explained how school choice empowers parents, drawing from *The School Choice Journey*, a new book he co-wrote with Patten University President Thomas Stewart. Wolf described the book as a story of “challenge, transformation, and triumph.”

Unlike most research on school choice, which Wolf said is “dominated by quantitative studies” and “very test-score centered,” this new study takes a qualitative look at the “subtle nuances of how families experience school choice” and the effect choice has “on behaviors and habits that can have some very important long-term implications.”

Looking at 100 fami-

lies that participated in the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program, the study documents their experiences, captured in focus groups and personal interviews. The findings are fascinating. Parents want “to shape their child’s education” and begin “by focusing on essential needs like safety,” said Wolf, before moving to higher-order needs like academics. Moreover, parents assess their child’s development “through subtle behavioral measures, and not necessarily test scores,” a finding that surprised the researchers.

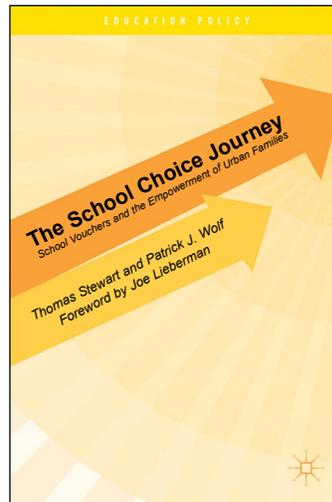
But “probably the most important finding,” said Wolf, “was the potentially transformative power of participation in school choice.” Parents moved from being “clients,” or passive recipients of educational services, to becoming “consumers,” who participated in a more balanced exchange of negotiated services, and then ultimately “citizens,” who actually helped shape power relationships in society. Families

became not only discriminating consumers, but also advocates of choice. “And when they were threatened with losing the opportunity of exercising parental choice, they became politically activated,” said Wolf.

A video of AEI’s conference, including reaction from smart panelists and questions from the audience, is available on AEI’s Web site at [www.aei.org](http://www.aei.org).



U.S. Sen. Tim Scott (R-SC) at the American Enterprise Institute Jan. 27. (image from AEI video)



## Capitol Hill Celebrates National School Choice Week

The 2015 edition of National School Choice Week amounted to an unqualified success, spanning 50 states with over 11,000 events and a record-setting number of proclamations by Democratic and Republican governors, mayors, and county leaders. Officials said the week of January 25-31 was “America’s largest-ever celebration of opportunity in education.”

One of the week’s linchpin events took place on Capitol Hill in the historic Cannon Caucus Room, where more than 300 people gathered to hear federal legislators tout the merits of providing parents with choice in education.

### Regular Guy

Organized by the American Federation for Children and cosponsored by the Maryland CAPE, the DC CAPE, and other advocacy groups, the celebration featured a keynote address by House Speaker John Boehner. “I’m a regular guy with a big job,” said Boehner. “I’ve got 11 brothers and sisters, grew up working at my dad’s bar, and my parents sent all 12 of us to Catholic schools. I don’t know how they managed it, but I owe everything to that opportunity.”

Referring to the choice initiative that he helped get through Congress and that is up for reauthorization this year, Boehner said the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program shows “that students thrive when parents are empowered to pick the best schools.”

The speaker challenged audience members to share their story. He told them that by doing so, “you can change hearts and minds. And if you can change hearts and minds, you can change the laws. And if you can change the laws, you can change the face of education in this country.”

### Not OK

Congressman Luke Messer (R-IN), chair of the Congressional School Choice Caucus, served as master of ceremonies for the event. “Today was an opportunity to shine a spotlight on the need to create high quality educational opportunities for every child,” he said. “The fact is lots of kids go to great schools in America, but too

many don’t. And that’s not OK. We cannot rest until every child has access to a great school.”

### Civil Rights Issue

U.S. Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) also addressed the gathering. “Just last week we celebrated



House Speaker John Boehner at the National School Choice Week rally at the U.S. Capitol Jan. 28. (image from speaker.gov video)

Martin Luther King Day. In 1963, Dr. King stood at the Lincoln Memorial and promised justice for all of our children. School choice is the civil rights issue of the 21st century,” said the senator. “It shouldn’t matter what your race or ethnicity or ZIP code is. Every single child deserves an opportunity to achieve the very best. That’s what school choice is all about.”

Cruz is a cosponsor of Senator Tim Scott’s Creating Hope and Opportunity for Individuals and Communities through Education (CHOICE) Act (see article on p. 2).

### Countless Students

House Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman John Kline (R-MN) was another featured speaker at the rally. In a statement issued in connection with School Choice Week, Kline said: “Countless students have escaped failing schools and received a quality education because parents were empowered to do what’s best for their child’s education. It is time to extend to more families the promise of school choice.”

Several Capitol Hill champions of choice continued the festivities later in the day by gathering at the Heritage Foundation for a roundtable discussion on the future of school choice. Representative Messer, Senator Cruz, and Representative Todd Rokita (R-IN), chairman of the House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education, joined Dr. Patrick Wolf, professor at the University of Arkansas, for a practical and open discussion on the importance of providing parents the chance to direct their child’s education.

Heritage also had the distinction of kicking off Washington’s NSCW festivities the previous Saturday by sponsoring what was billed as a “healthy, fun” 5K run at American University to promote parent choice.

## Almighty Tests

In their new book, *The School Choice Journey*, Patrick Wolf and Thomas Stewart report a surprising finding (see article on p. 2). Parents are not all that interested in standardized test scores when it comes to assessing their child’s progress in school. Instead, they tend to look at more subtle measures—actions and attitudes they are expert at interpreting. Is the child motivated and engaged? Does she have solid study habits? What is his attitude about school? As Wolf pointed out during his recent presentation at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), these are behaviors and traits that can have significant long-term consequences in terms of graduation, economic productivity, and even responsible citizenship.

Elaborating on this point during a panel discussion on the book, Rick Hess, AEI’s director of education policy studies, noted that researchers have a “natural but unfortunate habit” of studying what they are rewarded to study through incentives such as grants, tenure, and publication in journals. Too often that means studying test scores. As a result, the value of an education intervention is frequently judged not on whether it yields “the things that we believe are good for kids” but merely on whether it produces an uptick in reading and math performance.

Hess remarked that most people want schools to be places of wonder and joy; places where kids are safe and challenged and invited to explore the world; places where they are enlightened and energized. “The problem,” he said, is that “we have no idea how to measure hardly any of that.” Moreover, reading and math scores are not necessarily “good proxies for all the stuff that we really care most about.”

Hess praised Wolf and Stewart for looking at “a really important piece of the puzzle” that is often ignored in education research.

Return service requested

## CAPE notes

★ New York Governor Andrew M. Cuomo on January 21 presented his “2015 Opportunity Agenda,” which included the following sentence: “To support private investments from individuals and businesses in educational programs that provide families with choices for their children, Governor Cuomo proposes to create the Education Tax Credit, which will allow taxpayers to claim a tax credit for eligible contributions to public schools, school improvement organizations, local education funds, and educational scholarship organizations.”

On the same day, the NYS Senate passed the Education Investment Tax Credit (EITC) bill, which provides a credit up to 90 percent of an individual’s or a corporation’s eligible contributions. The credit is capped at \$150 million for 2016 and increases to \$300 million for 2018. The bill also provides a personal tax credit for teachers who use their own money to purchase instructional materials and supplies.

The two actions were met with considerable enthusiasm from parent choice advocates, including members of the NYS Coalition for Independent and Religious Schools, the state CAPE affiliate, which has been working on this issue for years.

“Today is a historic day for education policy in New York State,” said Timothy Cardinal Dolan, archbishop of New York and president of the New York State Catholic Conference. “These developments provide the best momentum to date for

the eventual enactment of the tax credit,” he added.

Rabbi Shmuel Lefkowitz, vice president for community affairs at Agudath Israel of America, said, “Needy parents in the New York yeshiva community have reason today to be hopeful that their tuition bills may be significantly reduced.”

★ The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice last month released the 2015 edition of *The ABCs of School Choice*, a comprehensive catalog of choice programs across the country.

In this year’s edition, we learn that the Illinois tax credit for education expenses is the nation’s largest school choice program, reaching 293,813 families.

Looking for details on the scope, benefits, eligibility, and history of every choice program in the nation? This is your source. It’s available for free at <[www.ed-choice.org](http://www.ed-choice.org)>.

★ The Alliance for School Choice (ASC) announced that its “Educational Choice Now” PSA was scheduled to air nationwide during National School Choice Week through a media buy “valued at a half million dollars.”

“Every day, too many children are trapped in a school that does not work for their needs, but school choice empowers parents and provides needed alternatives for millions of children nationwide,” said Kevin P. Chavous, executive counsel of ASC.

The PSA, which features a host of sports and media figures, was scheduled to focus on the following markets: Raleigh, Nashville, Tallahassee, Columbus, Columbia, Montgomery, Madison, Reno, and Washington, DC.

★ Also on the media front, representatives from the American Federation for Children (AFC) spent some time promoting parent choice on “radio row” during the 2015 NFL Super Bowl in Phoenix, Arizona. Scheduled spokespersons included former WNBA player and Olympic gold-medal winner Lisa Leslie, and former NFL player and current ESPN analyst Marcellus Wiley.

The AFC recently released results from a national poll of likely voters that found 69 percent support school choice; 54 percent believe that giving parents more choice will improve the education system, and 65 percent believe choice and competition among schools improves education.

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