

Council for American Private Education

CAPE outlook

Voice of America's private schools

President Trump Calls on Congress to Enact School Choice

Calling education the “civil rights issue of our time,” President Donald Trump, in his first address to a joint session of Congress, urged lawmakers to “pass an education bill that funds school choice for disadvantaged youth, including millions of African-American and Latino children.” Families, said the president, “should be free to choose the public, private, charter, magnet, religious, or home school that is right for them.”

The president punctuated his point with the remarkable story of Denisha Merriweather (see p. 3), a guest in the gallery, who, the president said, “struggled in school and failed third grade twice,” but then enrolled in a private school with the help of a tax credit scholarship and became “the first in her family to graduate, not just from high school, but from college.”

Mr. Trump’s address reflected his campaign proposal to help low-income students escape substandard schools, a theme he revisited in mid-February at a meeting with parents and teachers at the White House. During that meeting Trump said, “Millions of poor, disadvantaged students are trapped in failing schools....That’s why I want every single disadvantaged child in America, no matter what their background or where they live, to have a choice about where they go to school.”

Congress Explores Choice

Anticipating the president’s push for school choice, Congress has been doing its own work on the issue. On February 2, the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education, chaired by Representative Todd Rokita (R-IN), held a hearing entitled, “Helping Students Succeed Through the Power of School Choice.” The stated goal of the hearing was to “examine how federal policies can support innovative education options and discuss ways to extend school choice opportunities to more students.”

In his opening statement at the hearing, Representative Rokita observed, “Across the country, efforts are underway to empower parents with more options when it comes to their children’s education.”

He noted that “charter schools are currently serving close to 3 million students, and nearly 400,000 kids are benefitting from a private school choice program – more than ever before.”

Rokita went on to say that with the new Congress and administration, “we now have an opportunity to extend the power of school choice” while continuing “our work to improve traditional public schools.” He said the two efforts “go hand in hand” and that members of Congress “will never turn our backs on the millions of students who attend our nation’s public schools.” But at the same time, he said, “we also want to ensure parents have the opportunity to choose the best school for their children.”

“No one on this committee would ever leave their child trapped in a failing school. No one,” said Rokita, “Yet, some would deny other parents the right to do what’s best for their children.”

Proponent of Public Schools

Michael L. Williams, former Texas commissioner of education, testified at the House hearing, introducing himself as the son of two public school teachers, a graduate of public schools, and a “lifetime proponent, beneficiary and servant of America’s public schools.”



Mr. Michael L. Williams, former Texas commissioner of education, and Ms. Almo J. Carter, a parent in the District of Columbia. (Committee Photo)

“I’m here to tell you something that has become clear to me during my years of work in education,” the commissioner told the committee: “School choice, including private school choice, is not a threat to

strong public schools.”

“Parents are a child’s first and most important educators,” he said. “They are also a child’s best advocates. Allowing parents to choose the best education options to meet their child’s unique needs is good

for our education system and our schools. But, most importantly, it’s good for our children.”

He went on to say that “our education system ought to empower parents to make education choices based on what they know their children need to be successful.”

Effect on Public Schools

On the impact of choice on public education, Williams said: “Despite what you may have heard, private school choice is not at the expense of public school students. In fact, 31 of 33 empirical studies found that choice improved the performance of neighboring traditional public schools. The reality is that choice encourages the traditional public school system to be more responsive to students’ needs and parents’ preferences.”

Williams also had a point to make on accountability: “It is important to strike the right balance between accountability for public dollars and the autonomy essential to private schooling.”

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 of Islamic Schools in North America
- 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
- Affiliated State Organizations

a coalition of national associations serving private schools K-12
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NY Governor Unveils \$25 Million Security Grant Program

New York Governor Andrew M. Cuomo last month said the state will spend \$25 million in a new grant program to improve safety and security at religious schools and day care centers. The governor made the announcement following a roundtable discussion with more than 50 religious leaders, including representatives from the Christian, Jewish and Muslim faiths. The forum was held at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in lower Manhattan.

According to the governor's office, the funds will be used to "boost safety and security at New York's schools and day care centers at risk of hate crimes or attacks because of their ideology, beliefs, or mission." Funds will be used for "additional security training needs, cameras and state-of-the-art technology, door-hardening, improved lighting, and other related security upgrades."

Beacon of Tolerance

"New York must always be the beacon of tolerance and hope for all, and with the recent explosion of anti-Semitism and hate crimes, it is more important than ever before that we do everything in our power to ensure the safety and equal treatment of all New Yorkers," Governor Cuomo said. "Any acts of bias or discrimination will be met with the full force of the law. New York is and always has been a place that celebrates diversity and religious tolerance, and we say to all New Yorkers who feel unsafe: We will always protect you."

Rash of Hate Crimes

The governor's office reported that the "Jewish community has been increasingly targeted by bomb threats and hate crimes in recent months," noting that just the previous day "there was a bomb threat targeting the Anti-Defamation League's national headquarters in midtown Manhattan." Further, "there was a 31 percent increase in reported hate crimes targeting Muslims in 2016 across New York State compared to 2015."

The *Los Angeles Times* reported that on February 27 of this year, bomb threats were called in to 20 Jewish schools and community centers in 12 states.

New York's new program, to be administered by the state's Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services, is an effort to respond to the chilling rise in threats and crimes.

Evan Bernstein, New York regional director at the Anti-Defamation League, responded to the governor's proposal saying, "When these matters are addressed at the highest level of government like this, it sends a powerful and reassuring message to our community, which is understandably anxious."



New York Governor Andrew Cuomo speaks at a conference of religious leaders February 23 at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in lower Manhattan. (Photo NYS Governor's Office)

Imam Shamsi Ali, a Muslim scholar and director of the Jamaica Muslim Center, observed, "Across the United States, acts of racism and violence have grown in frequency and intensity over the past few months," noting that the attacks frequently target Muslims as well as Jews. He added, "I would like to declare as a Muslim that at a time when our Jewish brothers and sisters are facing this tremendously difficult moment, as a Muslim, I am standing with them tall and strong."

Drive a Spoke into the Wheel

Bishop James Massa, auxiliary bishop in the Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn, quoted from Lutheran theologian and anti-Nazi activist Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself." Massa said the state's interfaith leaders were standing together with the governor "to drive a spoke into the wheel that drives hatred, bigotry, intolerance."

Extremely Important

Rabbi David Zwiebel, executive vice president of Agudath Israel of America and a member of CAPE's board of directors, attended the governor's roundtable discussion. Zwiebel called the new grant program "extremely important," and added, "These are dangerous times, and we need to harden our institutions. This special allocation will help us do so."

Other attendees from Agudath included Shlomo Werdiger, chairman of the board; Rabbi Shmuel Lefkowitz, vice president for community affairs; and Mr. Chaskel Bennett and Mr. Leon Goldenberg, members of the board and leaders of the group's government affairs committee.

A statement from Agudath noted: "Increased security funding has been a top legislative priority for the Jewish community, and Agudath Israel has played a major role in advocating for increased funding for Jewish schools over the past few years."

DeVos Takes Charge of Education Department

"I, Elizabeth DeVos, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office upon which I am about to enter. So help me God."

Speaking those solemn words with her hand on the Bible, Betsy DeVos was sworn in as U.S. Secretary of Education February 7 by Vice President Mike Pence at his ceremonial office in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building,

adjacent to the White House. Earlier that day, the U.S. Senate had confirmed Mrs. DeVos as education secretary, with the vice president casting the decisive and historic tiebreaking vote. (Never in the country's history has that happened for a cabinet nominee.) At the swearing-in ceremony, Mr. Pence called his critical vote the "easiest" he had ever cast.

Describing Mrs. DeVos as "one of the foremost advocates for children in the United States," the vice president noted that she and her family had devoted time, talent, and treasure "to ensuring that every child in America has an opportunity at a better life and a world-class education."

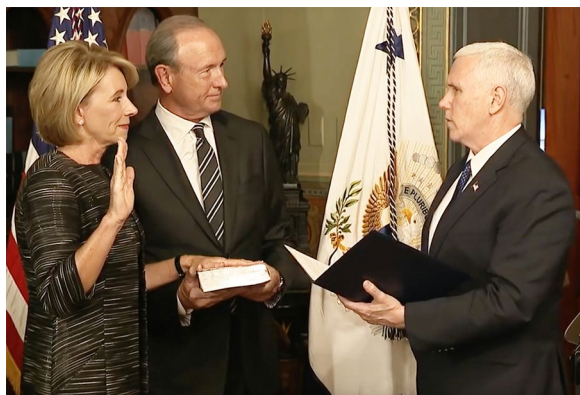
Quick to Take the Reins

Secretary DeVos wasted no time taking charge at the Department of Education. Her first full day on the job included her first all-staff meeting, at which she thanked her new colleagues for their work every day "to make education better." She struck a gracious note by singling out Phillip Rosenfelt, the well-respected attorney at the department, for his steady and selfless leadership as acting secretary and his "longstanding commitment to the department's mission."

In a touch of self-effacement, DeVos described her confirmation process as "a bit of a bear," while reassuring department staff that she's a "doors open type of person who listens more than speaks."

"I am here to serve—with you," she said. "I

am committed to working with everyone and anyone—from every corner of the country, from every walk of life, from every background, and with those who supported my nomination and those who did not—to protect, strengthen, and create new world-class education opportunities for America's students."



Vice President Mike Pence swears in Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education, as her husband holds the Bible. (White House Photo)

The new secretary challenged department staff to "be bold, think big, and act to serve students."

Whirlwind

Mrs. DeVos spent the first few weeks of her job in a whirlwind of activities and appearances, including visits to Howard University and Jefferson Middle School Academy in the District of Columbia, attendance

at a parent-teacher listening session at the White House, and addresses at the Magnet Schools of America National Policy Training Conference, the Community College National Legislative Summit, and the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC). She also met with institutional leaders of the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, and served as the keynote luncheon speaker at a conference in the Library of Congress of presidents and chancellors of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), hosted by Representative Mark Walker (R-NC) and Senator Tim Scott (R-SC).

Media Fun

During her talk February 23 at CPAC, DeVos acknowledged that the media "has had its fun with me, and that's OK." But she quickly added, "My job isn't to win a popularity contest with the media or the education establishment here in Washington. My job as secretary of education is to make education work for students."

DeVos took the opportunity to praise teachers. "We all know great public school teachers. My mom was one. Good teachers make a real difference. Good teachers deserve to be honored and compensated accordingly."

But she also noted that the "education establishment has been blocking the doorway to reforms...for a generation," and said, "We have a unique window of opportunity to make school choice a reality for millions of families," adding that "an equal opportunity for a quality education is an imperative that all students deserve."

Primo Seat

Denisha Merriweather pretty much landed the perfect place for watching President Trump deliver his first address to a joint session of Congress on February 28. She got a front-row seat with the first lady and five other special guests, including Maureen Scalia, widow of late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia.

Denisha is no stranger to Capitol Hill. Last February she offered riveting testimony at a hearing on school choice conducted by the House Committee on Education and the Workforce. During the hearing, she provided a compelling first-hand account of how the chance to choose a school that works transformed her life.

As an elementary school student, Denisha got a new lease on life by enrolling in Esprit de Corps Center for Learning, a member of the Association of Christian Schools International, thanks to a Florida tax credit scholarship.

"When I was growing up, college was a dream that I didn't even know I had," said Denisha at the hearing. "And if it weren't for an educational option Florida gave me 12 years ago, I wouldn't be sitting here today."

Denisha recalled how before enrolling in Esprit, she had been disruptive in school, getting into fights, struggling to keep up, and failing third grade—"not once, but twice." She described herself as "destined to drop out."

"Esprit de Corps was the change I needed," said Denisha, who reported her grades improved, that she regularly made the honor roll, and that Esprit "began to feel like a family."

Denisha went on to explain that her experience with school choice had made her a steadfast supporter. "I am committed to advocating for educational options because so many doors have been opened for me, and I want to create the same opened doors for other students."

(Adapted from Outlook No. 413)

CAPE notes

★ CAPE is moving full steam ahead in its search for a new executive director. A board-appointed search committee is actively involved in finding a dynamic and highly qualified individual for the position, which starts January 1, 2018.

Heads Up Educational Consulting and Triangle Associates are conducting the search. Information about applying for the position is available at capenet.org/directorsearch.html. The application deadline is May 15, 2017.

★ The National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) reported last month that President Donald J. Trump issued a letter recognizing National Catholic Schools Week, which took place January 29 to February 4. The event, whose theme this year was “Catholic Schools: Communities of Faith, Knowledge, and Service,” was cosponsored by NCEA and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

“I want to extend my heartfelt appreciation to all of the dedicated Catholic school administrators, teachers, priests, and support organizations who work tirelessly to build and sustain quality Catholic schools across the nation,” wrote the president.

He continued: “I appreciate the many ways in which Catholic schools nurture devotion, impart wisdom, and minister to the 2 million students who enter their halls every day....Your continued and sustained efforts are vital to our success and prosperity as a country.”

President Trump was scheduled to visit

St. Andrew Catholic School in Orlando, FL, on March 3—a school that won the U.S. Department of Education’s Blue Ribbon award in 2009.

★ “The amount of time students spend in learning environments, as well as the amount of time that students are exposed to instruction in particular subjects, have been topics of debate and concern in education policy and practitioner circles,” states a report released last month by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Part of NCES’s “Statistics in Brief” series, the report, titled “Instructional Time for Third- and Eighth-Graders in Public and Private Schools: School Year 2011-12” examines just what the title suggests. Specifically, the report “presents information on the amount of time that students in grades 3 and 8 spent on different subjects in 2011-12 and compares how, if at all, this time varied by subject and school sector.”

Key findings include the following:

- “On average, third-graders in both public and private schools spent a greater amount and a larger percentage of time on instruction in English, followed by mathematics, than on any other subject.”
- “On average, eighth-graders in both public and private schools spent a greater amount and a larger percentage of time on instruction in English than on any other subject.”
- “Third-graders in public schools spent more time—in terms of both the amount

and the percentage of time—on English than did eighth-graders. Meanwhile, third-graders in public schools spent less time on social studies and science than did eighth-graders. No statistically significant differences were found in the amount or percentage of time that third-graders and eighth-graders in private schools spent on English, mathematics, social studies, or science.”

Looking at the instructional week in general, the report noted, “On average, in 2011-12, the length of a typical full week of school was between 33 and 34 hours for third- and eighth-graders in public schools, at 33.0 hours long for third-graders and 33.8 hours long for eighth-graders.” Further, “There were no measurable differences in the amount of time in a typical full week of school for public and private school students in third or eighth grade.”

Download the report at <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017076.pdf>.

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