

Council for American Private Education

CAPE outlook

Voice of America's private schools

National School Choice Week Celebrated Across the Country

January 20-26 was National School Choice Week (NSCW) and by all accounts it was a great success. A record 40,549 events and activities took place nationwide. Over five-hundred cities and counties issued proclamations, in addition to 18 gubernatorial proclamations, a resolution passed by the US Senate, as well as a presidential proclamation. There were many ways to participate, including through social media, and NSCW organizers estimate that 10.8 million people joined in nationwide.

Washington, DC

On January 15, the Congressional School Choice Caucus held a press conference in Washington, DC to kick off the festivities. Caucus Co-Chairs Senator Tim Scott (SC) and Representative Paul Mitchell (MI) were joined by Representative Joe Wilson (SC), Representative John Moolenaar (MI), and Representative Andy Biggs (AZ) in discussing the importance of choice as a public policy priority. Senator Scott sponsored the Senate resolution supporting NSCW, which boasted an impressive thirty cosponsors and declared that “providing a diversity of choices in K–12 education empowers parents to select education environments that meet the individual needs and strengths of their children.”

School choice advocates took time during NSCW to commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP), the only federally funded voucher program in the country. The Heritage Foundation hosted a panel discussion which included an appearance by Education Secretary Betsy DeVos. School choice hero Virginia Walden Ford also spoke at Heritage, and was later honored at a reception for her indispensable role in the creation of the OSP. A feature

length film about Ms. Ford's tireless efforts to bring educational choice to the nation's capital is in production.

President Trump issued a proclamation urging “lawmakers in Congress and in the States to embrace and expand education choice, which will strengthen our students, families, educators, communities, and ultimately, our great Nation.” Vice President Pence tweeted out the message that “This is Nat'l School Choice Week, and working with Sec. @BetsyDeVosED and our entire Administration, @POTUS & I are committed to empowering students and parents and giving every family in America the opportunity to choose the education that's best for them.” Secretary DeVos recorded a message of support, saying, “Students have more opportunities today than ever before. This week is an opportunity to

were 47 flagship events in 35 states. In Kansas, more than 200 people rallied for school choice inside the State Capitol Building in Topeka. Students, parents, and teachers from private schools across the state were in attendance, including Urban Preparatory Academy, Holy Savior Catholic Academy, Northfield School of the Liberal Arts, and Bishop Ward High School. Pastor Wade Moore, founder and dean of Urban Preparatory Academy in Wichita, gave a rousing speech and called the event a “rumble in the rotunda.”

In Mississippi, over a thousand school choice supporters rallied outside the State Capitol Building in Jackson, according to Empower Mississippi. Among the speakers were House Speaker Philip Gunn and Lieutenant Governor Tate Reeves. Meanwhile, in Carson City, Nevada, over five-hundred people marched from the Plaza Conference Center to the State Capitol in a show of support for school choice.

In South Carolina, Lieutenant Governor Pamela Evette told the crowd that “Supporting school choice is one of the most important things we can do to improve academic outcomes in our state.” She tweeted out that she's “Proud to stand with educators, parents, students and elected officials during today's @MySCEducation Rally.” Finally, in Austin, Texas, US Senator Ted Cruz told the crowd, “I believe school choice is the civil rights issue of the 21st century, and every single child in the state of Texas deserves access to an excellent education. It shouldn't matter what your race is. It shouldn't matter what your ethnicity is. It shouldn't matter how much money you have.”

National School Choice Week 2020 will be January 26 – February 1. Visit <https://schoolchoiceweek.com/> for more information.



Representative Paul Mitchell (MI) looks on as Senator Tim Scott (SC) meets a young man hoping to attend the school of his dreams someday. (Photo from Rep. Mitchell's office)

celebrate the many #SchoolChoice victories, and to continue to fight for the students and families who remain limited. Parents and students simply need more education freedom.”

In the States

According to NSCW's staff, there

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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
Islamic Schools League of America
Jesuit Schools Network
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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AFC Poll Shows Strong Support for School Choice

The American Federation for Children (AFC) and Beck Research, a Democratic polling firm that has also done work for the National Education Association, released their fifth annual National School Choice Poll in January. According to the press release from AFC, “The survey of 1,200 likely November 2020 voters showed that 67% of voters support school choice, an increase of 4 percentage points compared to the 2018 National School Choice Poll.”

Those polled were asked, “Generally speaking, would you say you favor or oppose the concept of school choice?” with school choice defined this way: “School choice gives parents the right to use the tax dollars designated for their child’s education to send their child to the public or private school which best serves their needs.” Two-thirds (67%) answered in favor of school choice, including 40% who strongly support it, while 27% were opposed.

Digging into the Results

According to the AFC/Beck polling, support for school choice cuts across ethnicity and political preference. Latino support stands at 73% with only 19% opposed. Whites (68%) and African-Americans (67%) also registered high levels of support.

Four out of five Republicans (80%) and more than two-thirds (69%) of Independents supported school choice, while more than half of Democrats (56%) were in favor, up two percentage points from last year.

Sixty-four percent of suburban voters favored school choice. This includes 63% of suburban women and 51% of suburban Democrats. Likely voters from rural areas, where support for school choice is often believed to be soft, expressed support by a 68-28 margin.

Support among Millennials is very high, with 75% expressing favor and 21% opposition, while parents and grandparents expressed approval 72% to 23%.

The various forms that school choice can take also garnered substantial support. Education Savings Accounts were supported by

78% of those polled, up twelve points since 2015. This includes Democratic support by a 73% to 21% margin, up from 63% to 33% in 2015. Tax credit scholarship programs were supported 68% to 28% while vouchers came in at 53% to 44%.

Interestingly, “Fully 58% of survey respondents report that their children currently attend traditional public school, but only 35% report that public schools are their first choice of school. In contrast, 59% of parents

indicate that they would prefer for their child to attend a different type school (29% religious school and 18% private non-religious).”

Additionally, “Almost 3 in 5 parents picked three or more from

a list of possible personal sacrifices ‘to send (their) child to a private school for free.’

The most popular actions: cutting all eating out and take-out from restaurants for a year (62%) and stop drinking coffee or caffeine for a year (62%). In addition, about half of the parents indicate that they are willing to drive their child 25 miles each way to school (49%), move 10 miles away (46%) or change jobs (41%). Only 13% wouldn’t be willing to take one of the actions to enroll their child in private school for free.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, the polling showed that likely voters would be more inclined to support a candidate for office if he or she supported school choice.

John Schilling, President of the American Federation for Children, said in a statement: “Despite relentless attacks from opponents of educational freedom throughout the past year, school choice support has grown over the past year. Most parents want a different option for their child and are willing to make sacrifices to go to a better school if they had the option. Republicans, Democrats, Independents, and communities of color are all demanding greater choice in K-12 education. It’s time for policymakers to listen to these voters and pass legislation that gives more families the freedom to choose the best educational environment for their child.”



News from the States

Florida

A January decision by the Florida Supreme Court on the adequacy of funding for public schools upheld the constitutionality of two choice programs, the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program and the McKay Scholarship Program for Students with Disabilities. The 4-3 ruling in *Citizens for Strong Schools v. State Board of Education* rejected arguments that the programs drain money from public education and are unconstitutional, opening the door to the potential expansion of choice programs in Florida. Governor Ron DeSantis has signaled his support for growing choice programs in the state.

Oregon

On January 18, Oregon Governor Kate Brown issued a proclamation declaring February 7, 2019 to be Oregon Private Schools Appreciation Day. Among other findings, the proclamation says that “Oregon private schools are an important part of the tradition of educational excellence in Oregon and an important element in the overall education of Oregon youth,” and “The delivery of education by private elementary and secondary school faculty, staff, and volunteers adds to the general diversity and variety of the state of Oregon, and these educators are deserving of recognition.”



Illinois

According to an Empower Illinois [press release](#), more than 30,000 students applied for tax credit scholarships within first few hours of the process being opened. “This demand clearly illustrates both the need and support for this critical program, which makes quality education options accessible to low-income and working-class students across Illinois,” said Anthony Holter, Executive Director of Empower Illinois. Approved in the summer of 2017, this will be the second year of what is currently set to be a five year pilot program. Illinois’ new Governor J.B. Pritzker has expressed opposition to the program and said on the campaign trail that “we should as soon as possible do away with it.”

Wisconsin

A [Heartland Institute release](#) shows that

students participating in the Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (WPCP) outperformed their peers in public schools on the ACT. Drawing from Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) data, the Heartland Institute says that in 2018, “WPCP students earned an average composite score of 21 out of a possible 36 points on the ACT, 1.3 points higher than the statewide average of 19.7.” Ola Lisowski, research director at the MacIver Institute, told Heartland, “I’m not surprised by the data. It’s the third year in a row that school choice students have outperformed their public-school peers.” The Heartland story notes that “participation in WPCP is restricted to children in households earning up to 220 percent of the federal poverty level.”

DC

Senator Ron Johnson (WI) and Representative Mark Walker (NC) have introduced Senate and House bills reauthorizing the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP). The OSP is the only federally funded voucher program in the country and the authorization for the program expires at the end of fiscal year 2019. The new legislation would reauthorize the program

for five years. The average annual income of families with a student on scholarship is approximately \$23,000. During the program’s fifteen year history, over 10,000 scholarships have been awarded. In a press release from the bill’s sponsors, Senator Johnson said, “The Opportunity Scholarship Program has helped students from low-income households attain a graduation rate 21 percentage points higher than comparable students. The fact that twice as many children apply for the program as can be accommodated shows how strong demand is from parents seeking such positive results for their children.”

Another issue centered in the nation’s capital, but this one directly affecting states across the country, is the ongoing saga of the IRS’s proposed regulations on tax credit scholarship programs (see the December and September 2018 issues of *Outlook*). In late December, the IRS issued guidance that appears to clear the way for corporate donors to be able to continue their donations on a fully tax-deductible basis. The much-awaited rules for individual donors, however, remain in limbo. Stay tuned.

Secretary DeVos on Choice

Education Secretary DeVos used the occasion of National School Choice Week (NSCW) to offer full-throated support for school choice and praise for those who have been working in the trenches over the years on the issue.

Appearing at the Heritage Foundation with Virginia Walden Ford and other choice leaders, Secretary DeVos talked about the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program, which is celebrating its fifteenth year. “The importance of the Washington scholarship program can’t be overstated,” she said. “Congress definitely has got to reauthorize it...We have today a president who supports choices now. We have an administration that is supportive. We have many on Capitol Hill that are supportive.” She went on to ask Heritage for support as “we continue to advance choices not only for kids here in the District of Columbia, but across this country.” She added “it is unconscionable, in my view, to use this program as a political football.”

Shortly after the end of NSCW, the secretary addressed the National School Boards Association, telling attendees that “Freedom is not a threat. The only folks who are threatened by education freedom are the same ones who have a vested financial interest in suppressing that freedom.”

“Right now – today – there are students across our country who are far too limited, who have no education freedom...And each one is forced to stay in the school that doesn’t work for them simply because they’re assigned there by their zip code. Those students are relying on us to unlimit their education, to expand their freedom.” Additionally, “A one-size-fits-all approach is a mismatch for too many kids. Every student learns differently. That every student should be free to do so is why I’m here.”

CAPE notes

★ In recent days, certain private schools, specifically religious schools, have found themselves the subject of no small amount of unflattering media coverage. In January, when it was announced that Karen Pence, wife of Vice President Mike Pence, would be returning to a previous position teaching art at Immanuel Christian School in Virginia, stories about the school's standard of conduct policy began to proliferate. These stories were often less than perfectly balanced, with online versions embedding tweets from individuals fiercely hostile to the beliefs held by many Christian schools. One person on social media launched the hashtag #ExposeChristianSchools, saying "Hey fellow Christian school grads, let's tell @VP and @DavidAFrench how traumatizing those bastions of bigotry are," a development that ended up garnering significant attention from national media outlets.

That same week, the country erupted into an uproar over an encounter between high school boys from Covington Catholic High School in Kentucky and a couple of other groups of protestors at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. The conclusions people drew from an apparent stare down between Covington student Nicholas Sandmann and Native American activist Nathan Phillips served as a sort of Rorschach test for where people stand on a host of cultural issues. However, one commonly articulated theme was that bad behavior from boys at a private, religious high school should come as no surprise. After all, did

not Brett Kavanaugh attend such a school?

Fortunately, there have been voices in the commentariat who have pushed back forcefully against this meme. Writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, William McGurn, while describing the controversy over the students from Covington Catholic, observed, "One of the lesser known things about Catholic schools is that they boast a 99% high-school graduation rate—with 86% going to a four-year college, nearly twice the 44% rate of public schools. Particularly in the inner cities, these schools are a lifeline, not least for the tens of thousands of non-Catholic children of color who without that education might be condemned to lives lived at the margins of the American Dream."

Moreover, many who jumped to all-too-quick conclusions over what happened in front of the Lincoln Memorial ended up walking back their comments and promising to do better next time. And a *New York Times* piece on the #ExposeChristianSchools hashtag did in the end give those who had positive experiences at Christian schools some chance to be heard.

Still, it is hard not to notice that articles are being written and reports issued about the fact that religious schools are receiving public support through tax exemptions and school choice programs even though they adhere to teachings on human sexuality currently out of favor. There will be increasing legislative, legal, and regulatory challenges ahead for religious schools, but politics is ultimately downstream of culture. If society

sees religious schools as "bastions of bigotry," and private schools in general as walled-off enclaves for the well-to-do, the best lawyers and legislators will ultimately be of no avail.

It is therefore crucial that proper attention be given to the immense contribution that private schools – religious schools very much included – make to local communities and to the common good of the nation. Religious schools must not think that they can be saved by religious exemptions alone. They need to tell the story of how they change the lives of young people for the better, otherwise all of the constitutional and statutory protections in the world will in the end amount to what James Madison called, in Federalist 48, mere "parchment barriers."

In the face of reporting that simply assumes as a given that their conduct policies are motivated by pure animus and bigotry, religious institutions operating in the educational space will need to be willing to explain and defend what they believe, and not be bullied into silence.

