

Council for American Private Education

# CAPE outlook

Voice of America's private schools

## President Bush Signs Voucher Legislation

All social and political movements have defining moments: events that turn things around, cause renewed commitment, provide forward thrust. Historians look back at such episodes and label them milestones. While it is too soon to know for sure, all signs suggest that the enactment last month of the first federally funded K-12 voucher program will someday be seen as a defining moment in the school-choice movement.

President Bush signed the D.C. School Choice Incentive Act into law on January 23, 2004. The historic legislation was part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act (CAA), a catchall spending bill that the Senate passed January 22 by a vote of 65-28 and the House passed December 8 by a vote of 242-176.

The CAA includes \$14 million to provide low-income students in the District of Columbia with up to \$7,500 to cover costs at private schools. The program is part of a \$40 million three-way package that includes \$13 million in new funds for the District's public schools and another \$13 million for its charter schools.

### Friends in High Places

From the start, the voucher initiative had friends in high places, who all contributed to its enactment. President Bush and his administration vigorously promoted the measure. A year ago, the president provided the first step on the path to passage by including in his FY 2003 budget a \$75 million national Choice Incentive Fund, with some of the money earmarked for the District of Columbia. Last July, Bush gave the initiative a big boost by visiting a school in the District and strongly promoting the choice plan. The president was there for the final phase of the journey, too. Days before passage of the CAA, with the outcome still in doubt, the president called on the Senate to pass the bill for the sake of "educational

excellence" and "a change in education around the country."

U.S. Education Secretary Rod Paige



By Cable Risdon Photography for NCEA

President George W. Bush addressing Catholic school leaders last month at the White House.

and high-level officials at the Department of Education worked relentlessly, in public and behind the scenes, to bring the legislation to fruition. Their many activities included testifying at Congressional hearings and meeting with D.C. officials to make sure the bill reflected local concerns. Commenting on the bill's passage, which he called "a truly historic event," Paige said school choice would "help create an educational system that makes no distinction between the poor and the privileged." Noting that the ability to make choices is "a bedrock of a democratic society," he said the legislation will give low-income students in D.C. "the same educational opportunities as the District's more economically fortunate students."

Another critical player was D.C. Mayor Anthony Williams. A Democrat, Williams gave the legislation an enormous, and perhaps decisive, lift last spring when he announced support for the program. In September, the mayor spent consider-

able time and effort urging members of Congress to back the measure, and when the Senate passed the bill last month, Williams called it "a great day for the District of Columbia."

The mayor was a strong proponent of what he dubbed the "tripartite" approach, designed to bolster funding for children in public schools, private schools, and charter schools. To no one's surprise, Williams, in his post-passage comments, emphasized the three-sector benefits of the bill and said that, despite claims from opponents to the contrary, the voucher program "will not result in any net reduction of federal or state-level funding for public school education." Acknowledging that he fought hard for the legislation and that he is "already working with public and private school leaders to make this program a success," the mayor repeated one of his fundamental reasons for backing the bill: "No child should be forced to stay in a failing school."

In deciding to champion school choice, Mayor Williams put a lot on the line.

Last month some rivals launched a campaign to recall him, citing his support of vouchers as one of their reasons.

The mayor wasn't the only Democrat to help with the voucher victory.

Last September the Senate Appropriations Committee approved the plan only after Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) broke ranks with her party to endorse the bill.



D.C. Mayor Anthony Williams

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# CAPE

## CAPE member organizations:

- American Montessori Society
- Association Montessori International—USA
- Association of Christian Schools International
- 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
- Seventh-day Adventist Board of Education
- Solomon Schechter Day School Association
- Southern Baptist Association of Christian Schools
- Toussaint Institute for Historically Black Independent Schools
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
- 28 Affiliated State Organizations

a coalition of national associations serving private schools K-12  
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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)



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Feinstein's backing gave the measure significant forward momentum.



Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA)

ate passed the bill, Frist called the program “a beacon of hope for the children of D.C. public schools.” He went on to say that the program gives students and their parents “a choice and a chance at a brighter future.” Frist then praised Mayor Williams and Senator Feinstein, saying they “deserve tremendous credit for challenging the status quo and fighting for accountability and choice.”



Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-TN)

Senator Gregg, who chairs the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, said passage of the legislation “brings unprecedented hope to all the District’s students, and new resources for its struggling public school system.” He said the initiative answers “the hopes and prayers of thousands of low-income parents in the District, who no longer have to wait for better educational opportunities—be they public or private—for their children.”

In the House of Representatives the program’s influential backers included Speaker

On the other side of the aisle, the voucher initiative had more than its share of friends. In the Senate, Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-TN) and Senators Judd Gregg (R-NH) and Mike DeWine (R-OH) played key roles in securing the climactic vote.

The day the Senate passed the bill, Frist called the program “a beacon of hope for the children of D.C. public schools.” He went on to say that the program gives students and their parents “a choice and a chance at a brighter future.” Frist then praised Mayor Williams and Senator Feinstein, saying they “deserve tremendous credit for challenging the status quo and fighting for accountability and choice.”

Dennis Hastert (R-IL) and Representatives John Boehner (R-OH), Tom Davis (R-VA), and Rodney Frelinghuysen (R-NJ). Boehner, who chairs the House Education and the Workforce Committee, praised the legislation’s passage, saying it provides “help and hope to the troubled D.C. public school system and its students.”

To be sure, the legislation had its share of opponents, too. And apparently they are even now determined to derail the voucher train before it leaves the station. The Washington Post reported that at a rally of voucher opponents held after the Senate vote, Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA) and Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC) “said they would attempt to repeal the voucher program and send the money to public schools.” Kennedy was quoted by The Post as saying, “Even after this vote, don’t bank on vouchers coming to D.C.”



Rep. John Boehner (R-OH) testifying last year at D.C. school choice hearings.

## Editorial Support

Speaking of The Washington Post, it turns out the paper itself played a part in the voucher victory by strongly backing the program in its editorials and thereby making the measure more mainstream. A few days after the Senate vote, the paper’s lead editorial said it was time “for the warring parties in the school choice debate to call a halt to hostilities.”

Acknowledging that the debate over school choice in D.C. had “unusual national significance,” The Post declared the battle over, at least for the time being, and went on to present this advice: “Everyone who cares about the future of D.C. schools needs to start thinking about how to design a voucher program that can do what its supporters say it can do: improve the education of the city’s children.”

The Post also offered its own ideas about program design. Arguing that a voucher plan in



Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-IL)

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## Secretary Paige Makes Case for Choice

Five days after President Bush signed the D.C. voucher legislation, U.S. Education Secretary Rod Paige delivered a strong defense of the program and outlined plans for its swift implementation. “It is now time to take the powerful idea of educational choice and put it to work in the real world of this marvelous city,” he said.

In an address on January 28 at the Heritage Foundation, Paige associated the voucher program with the U.S. Supreme Court’s breakthrough decision 50 years ago in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

He said that vouchers “help remove the chains of bureaucracy” and “free low-income students to obtain a better education.”

While acknowledging that a voucher program in the nation’s capital “will be in the spotlight” and will be “examined, dissected, second-guessed and debated each and every day,” the secretary said he is committed to implementing the program expeditiously. “Time is of the essence—we need to get this program up and running immediately so that children can benefit from it this fall when school starts again.”

In a peek at how the program will operate, Paige said parents interested in vouchers would receive information about participating private schools, including “the qualifications of teachers, the educational philosophy of the school, the available programs and courses in the

school, the record of achievement of the students in that school, student expectations (such as uniforms and required classes), and the safety and environment of the school.”



Chas Geer Photography  
U.S. Education Secretary Rod Paige at the Heritage Foundation, January 28, 2004.

Paige compared the D.C. initiative to two other federally funded programs that provide assistance to students in private and religious schools: Pell Grants and the GI Bill. He called the latter the “greatest voucher program in history” and said, “Choice for parents shouldn’t start when the kids reach college; it should start at the beginning.”

Commenting on the fierce battle that had been fought for the legislation’s passage, Paige said, “The heated rhetoric was almost unprecedented in its anger and intensity.” He went on to ask opponents of the program to “step aside and to give way.” He said it was time to “place the needs of our children ahead of partisan sniping. Right now we need statesmanship, not gamesmanship.”

Returning to the language of civil rights, Secretary Paige said vouchers provide students with “educational emancipation.” They give children the chance “to overcome circumstance and situation” and to attain a quality education and the opportunities such an education provides. “Education is freedom,” he said. “A good, wise, just and compassionate country makes certain that educational opportunities are available for all of its citizens—every single one of them.”

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the nation’s capital will be examined “more closely than most,” the paper called for a program of accountability that would safeguard the independence of private schools. “If there is no accountability at all, any voucher program will always be at risk,” warned the editorial. “Officials need to start thinking now about how they will monitor their program in a way that preserves the ideal of school independence yet holds school administrators accountable for the taxpayers’ money and the taxpayers’ children at the same time.” The Post suggested that participating schools be required “to publish and regularly update relevant information” and that officials allow market mechanisms to ensure “that both public and private schools failing to attract students suffer some financial consequences.”

### A Lot at Stake

Regardless of whether or not the D.C. initiative is judged by history to be a defining moment in the school choice movement, supporters and opponents alike already share a sense that there is a great deal riding on the voucher experiment. The media, issue advocates, lawmakers, and researchers will be scrutinizing the program over the next few years, searching for signs of success or failure. In its structure, its provisions, its path toward implementation, the D.C. School Choice Incentive Act will, in due time, offer some important lessons and answer some important questions. In the meantime, one thing is known for sure: Hundreds of families in the District of Columbia who once faced a future full of failure, will soon face a future full of hope.

## Bush Addresses Catholic Educators

At a meeting last month with leaders of Catholic education, President Bush said he would call on Congress to establish a \$50 million national choice incentive fund “to help more parents to send their children to the school that is best for them.”

Speaking in the East Room of the White House to mark the centennial of the National Catholic Educational Association, the president said his proposal would award federal grants to communities and organizations to help them establish programs similar to the school choice initiative for the District of Columbia.

The president used a substantial share of his 20-minute speech to extol the work of Catholic schools, calling them, at one point, “a model for all schools around the country.” In his praise, the president drew on themes from the No Child Left Behind Act. Catholic schools “share the basic conviction that every child can learn”; they insist on “high standards for academic achievement”; they challenge the “soft bigotry of low expectations.” Ultimately, Bush made the link between the NCLBA and Catholic schools unmistakable: “Much of what is behind the No Child Left Behind Act, the spirit and the philosophy of the No Child Left Behind Act came from the examples set by the Catholic schools. It’s a sense of what is possible. It is a sense that everybody has worth, that each soul matters.”



By Cable Risdon Photography for NCEA  
President George W. Bush and NCEA President Michael Guerra

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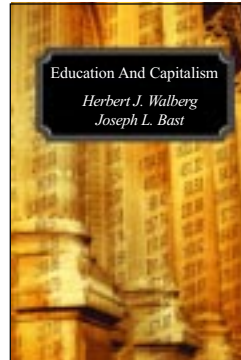
## CAPE notes

★ If Utah state legislator J. Morgan Philpot has his way, Florida will not be the only state providing private school vouchers for children with special needs. On January 29, Philpot introduced a bill (H.B. 115, Carson Smith Special Needs Scholarships) that would provide special-needs children with scholarships in amounts related to the extent of special education services they require. The bill's basic tenet is that "parents of students with disabilities should be able to select the school, whether public or private, that best meets the needs of the student."

To be eligible to participate in the program, a private school must be located in Utah, demonstrate fiscal soundness, comply with the antidiscrimination provisions of 42 U.S.C. Sec. 2000d, disclose to parents beforehand the special education services that the school will provide, administer annual assessments of each participating student and report the results to parents, and employ teachers qualified "to provide instruction in the subjects taught." To safeguard private schools against excessive regulations, the bill stipulates, "Nothing in this part grants additional authority to any state agency or school district to regulate private schools except as expressly set forth in this part."

★ Herbert L. Walberg, distinguished visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, and Joseph L. Bast, president of the Heartland Institute, came to Washington last month to discuss their

new book, *Education and Capitalism: How Overcoming Our Fear of Markets and Economics Can Improve America's Schools*. Speaking at the Cato Institute, Walberg and Bast advanced the premise that the public debate about school choice is really a debate about capitalism. They argued that until people understand market-based approaches and trust markets to improve education, they will never embrace school choice.



Their book, available at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com), has received some high praise. Chester E. Finn, Jr., president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, calls it "a genuinely original contribution" that "provides a basic course in the economics of capitalism, a primer on U.S. education problems, and a terrific explanation of why capitalism...offers the greatest hope for solving those problems."

★ The Fordham Foundation announced last month the winners of its 2004 prizes for educational excellence. The Prize for Valor was awarded to Howard L. Fuller, distinguished professor of education at Marquette University. The former superintendent of Milwaukee

public schools, Fuller fought for and defended the city's pioneering voucher program and is now regarded as one of the nation's most articulate and persuasive proponents of choice.

Fordham's Prize for Distinguished Scholarship was given to Eric A. Hanushek, a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, who has conducted breakthrough research on the relationship between resource allocation and student achievement.

Commenting on the winners, Chester E. Finn, Jr., Fordham's president, said: "Each has changed American K-12 education in profound and positive ways."

★ The first non-procedural roll call in the U.S. House of Representatives for the second session of the 108th Congress was on a resolution in praise of private schools. (The session's first roll call was the Call of the House, an attendance-taking procedure to determine the presence of a quorum.) On January 21, the House agreed to congratulate Catholic schools "for the key role they play in promoting and ensuring a brighter, stronger future for this Nation." The vote, in anticipation of Catholic Schools Week (January 25-31), was 398 to 1, with 33 members not voting. As for the lone nay vote, it turns out to have been a mistake. The member who cast it told the House later in the day, "I am in favor of the resolution, and I wish the record to reflect that I intended to vote in the affirmative."