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## National Report Card on Writing: Needs Improvement

The National Center for Education Statistics last month issued a report on the writing skills of the nation's students, and the results are, as one reporter put it, nothing to write home about. "The average, or typical, American student is not a proficient writer. Instead, students show only partial mastery of the knowledge and skills needed for solid academic performance in writing," said Gary W. Phillips, Acting Commissioner for NCES. Only about one-quarter of students nationally scored at or above the *Proficient* level, which is described as representing solid academic performance.

Grade 4		
	Public	Private
Basic	83	93
Proficient	22	35
Advanced	1	2
Grade 8		
	Public	Private
Basic	83	96
Proficient	24	44
Advanced	1	3
Grade 12		
	Public	Private
Basic	77	90
Proficient	20	35
Advanced	1	2

Students in private schools scored well above the national average in grades 4, 8, and 12. A higher percentage of private school students scored at or above the *Basic* (partial mastery of fundamental knowledge and skills), *Proficient*, or *Advanced* (superior performance) levels than public school students.

The complete NAEP 1998 Writing Report Card is available on the NCES Web site at: [http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/writing/wri\\_new\\_results.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/writing/wri_new_results.asp)

*The table identifies the share of students who scored at or above each achievement level.*

## Riley's Rx for Reform Resembles Private Schools

When Education Secretary Richard Riley last month presented his vision for the American high school in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, he was actually describing many attributes of today's private high schools. In his annual back-to-school address at the National Press Club, the Secretary prescribed a broad set of recommendations for reforming secondary schools, noting that the way Americans "learn and work has changed dramatically."

### Small, Caring Communities

Riley called for the creation of "small, supportive learning environments" that help students feel connected. His maxim for designing high schools, "Size matters," is a rule private schools

have regularly observed. The 1993-94 *Schools and Staffing Survey* (SASS) shows private high schools on average are less than half the size of public schools. In central cities, for example, the average size of a private high school is 398, compared to 1,083 for a public school. As for supportive environments, a number of studies identify "social capital," and strong, caring communities as hallmarks of private secondary schools.

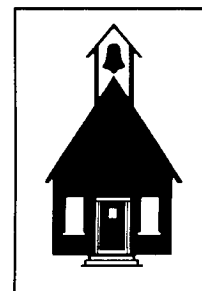
### Tough Core Curriculum

Secretary Riley also called on high schools to encourage all students to "take the tough core academic courses." He said the academic rigor of a student's coursework is the "single most important factor" in ensuring admission to,

and completion of, college. He challenged schools to end the "tyranny of low expectations" and to stop putting some students in "dead-end courses."

Academic rigor is also an area where private schools excel. In the *Condition of Education - 1998*, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that in the 1993-94 school year, 44.8 percent of private schools and 19.8 percent of public schools met the high school graduation recommendations of the National Commission

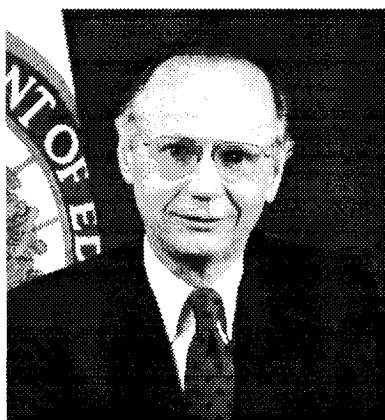
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on Excellence in Education. The NCEE guidelines call for 4 years of English, 3 years of mathematics, 3 years of science, and 3 years of social studies. In addition, various researchers have suggested that one reason for the academic success of private schools is that they set the same high academic goals for all students, essentially requiring a college prep program for everyone.

The practice appears to be paying off. NCES reports 87.5 percent of private high school students apply to college, compared to 57.4 percent of public high school students (SASS). And reports from the College Board indicate private schools account



Education Secretary Richard Riley

for 17 percent of all SAT test takers, even though they enroll only 7.5 percent of the country's high school students. Further, SAT scores for private school students are well above the national average for every racial, ethnic, and income group.

In keeping with his call for challenging coursework, Riley urged schools to stop shortchanging students by not "giving them the opportunity to stretch their minds" through AP courses.

Here, too, private schools do relatively well. Statistics from the College Board and NCES show that for high school seniors, 24.2 percent of private school students took AP exams in 1998, while 9.4 percent of public school students did

so. Private schools, which, again, account for only 7.5 percent of all high school students, produced 20 percent of 12<sup>th</sup> graders who took AP exams in 1998 and 22 percent of those who scored high enough to have the advanced courses count for college credit.

**Foreign Language**

Another area where Riley wants to see improvement is in the number of students studying a foreign language. Learning another language "exposes young people to new cultures and new horizons and helps them understand English better," he said. NCEES data indicate private schools have foreign language course requirements about four times as stringent as public schools. Whereas public schools on average require .3 years of foreign language instruction for high school graduation, private schools require 1.2 years (SASS).

The Secretary's speech is on the Web at [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov)

## Private Education: A Changing Landscape

The National Center for Education Statistics just released its *Private School Universe Survey (PSUS)*, a biennial report on core demographic data for private schools. The new report, which covers the 1997-98 school year, shows some shifts in the landscape of private education.

Since 1989, the year the survey was established, the share of students in Catholic schools has fallen, while the share of students in conservative Christian and nonsectarian schools has risen. In fact, for the first time this century, Catholic schools now account for less than a majority share of national private school enrollment. (As a point of reference, in 1969 Catholic schools enrolled about 85 percent of private school students nationwide.)

According to the PSUS, 27,402 private elementary

and secondary schools enrolled just over 5 million students in 1997-98. Another NCEES report, *Projections of Education Statistics to 2009*, estimates the 1997-98 private school enrollment at 5.9 million. The share of the nation's students in private schools has hovered around 11 percent since 1989.

The new report reveals that private

school students tend to attend schools that are urban and small. Forty-nine percent of students are in central city schools, and 47 percent are in schools that enroll less than 300 students.

The accompanying chart presents the percentage of private school students enrolled in certain categories of schools for both the 1989-90 school year, when the PSUS was established, and the 1997-98 school year. Not all the categories are mutually exclusive. "Conservative Christian" is an NCEES umbrella category that includes schools affiliated with a conservative Christian association. So, for example, some schools might be counted as "Baptist" and "Conservative Christian."

The report is available on the Web at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=1999319>

<b>Where do private school students go to school??</b>		
	<b>89-90</b>	<b>97-98</b>
Catholic	54.5%	49.5%
Nonsectarian	13.2%	15.7%
Conservative Christian	10.9%	14.5%
Baptist	5.8%	6.3%
Lutheran	4.4%	4.3%
Jewish	3.2%	3.3%
Episcopal	1.7%	1.8%
Seventh-day Adventist	1.6%	1.3%
Calvinist	0.9%	0.8%
Friends	0.3%	0.4%

## Liberal and Conservative Debunk Creaming Myth

You've heard the "creaming" argument against school vouchers – the one that claims only the best and brightest students will participate in voucher programs, leaving the least successful students in public schools. Well, that argument came under thunderous attack last month from two different directions, the right and the left.

Writing in the October 4 edition of *The New Republic*, Harvard professor and researcher Paul E. Peterson tackles the issue head on with fresh data from a study of a voucher program in San Antonio, Texas. He acknowledges that the "skimming" charge is a serious one, for if vouchers were to help only the most talented students, the children left behind would be those with the least skills and the greatest need. "We liberals are sensitive to this argument," he writes, "because we know that needy students are now getting the short end of the educational stick."

But Peterson presents research data that debunks the creaming myth. His study shows public school students who took advantage of vouchers had academic and socioeconomic profiles very similar to the students who shunned the vouchers and stayed in public schools.

Standardized scores in math for voucher students who had just entered private schools were at the 35<sup>th</sup> percentile, compared to the 37<sup>th</sup> percentile for public school students. And while there was a statistically significant difference in reading scores (voucher students at the 35<sup>th</sup> percentile, public school students at the 28<sup>th</sup>), the difference was "hardly the gaping disparity voucher opponents predicted." Average annual household income (both groups around \$16,000), ethnic background (96 per-

cent Latino), and levels of welfare dependency were virtually identical for the two groups. An important difference, however, was that voucher families were much more satisfied with their schools' academic quality, safety, discipline, and teachers.

Addressing the issue of racial and income inequities in an article essentially aimed at converting more liberals to the cause, Peterson says vouchers have the potential to improve socioeconomic and racial integration in education, in part because "private schools... are already more racially integrated than public ones." Given the



Harvard Researcher Paul Peterson

potential of vouchers, Peterson ponders, "you'd think more liberals would be open to experimenting with them."

An editorial in the same edition of the magazine notes it is becoming "increasingly difficult for liberals to deny that vouchers may be appropriate in the most critically needy and dysfunctional school districts."

### From the Right...

Florida Governor Jeb Bush also addressed the subject of skimming last month when he came to Washington to testify before the House Budget Committee on his program of school reform and opportunity scholarships. Bush explained that the brain-drain myth – that only smart students would seek the scholarships the state offers for youngsters in failing schools – was shattered in Florida

by recent data on students who are participating in the state's new program. According to Bush, "roughly even numbers of high-performing and low-performing students" are using the scholarships.

Students in two failing Pensacola public schools became eligible for the scholarships this year. A total of 134 children left the schools to attend either a different public school (76 students) or one of the five participating private schools (58 students), including four parochial schools and one Montessori school. Of the 61,000 students who could become eligible for scholarships next year if their schools fail to improve, 85 percent are minority students.

Bush said the choice program is realizing its intended effect of sparking genuine school improvement in the schools that have failed as well as in those in danger of failing. In Broward County, for example, officials have lowered the first-grade class size in the 104 at-risk schools. In Jacksonville, officials have introduced summer and after-



Florida Governor Jeb Bush

school programs to improve student skills. And most unusual, Hillsborough County school superintendent Earl Lennard has promised to take a five percent pay cut if any one of his schools receives an F.

In comments subsequent to his testimony, Bush said his reform plan has caused business people, educators, and others to focus in new ways on school improvement. "Traditional advocates of the status quo are now recognizing that this plan is going to improve public schools across the board." He said his hope is that the program will result in a renaissance of involvement of Floridians in education "in wild and wondrous ways."



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## capenotes

• Two presidential candidates had a lot to say about school vouchers last month. In a major policy speech on education, **George W. Bush** unveiled a proposal to make federal funds available directly to parents with children in chronically failing schools to allow them to choose private schools or "whatever offers hope." His plan would require Title I schools to make progress toward a state standard. If no progress were made after three years, the money could be used by parents for private schools, charter schools, or a different public school. "The federal government will no longer pay schools to cheat poor children."

Reacting to Bush's plan, Democratic candidate **Bill Bradley** said, "I don't think school vouchers are the answer to the problems of public education." A few weeks later, in an interview on ABC's *This Week*, Bradley said he voted for voucher experiments while serving in the Senate in order to give urban parents an option and to test the hypothesis that competition would improve public education. "I think we

can't leave anything unturned if what we're going to do is try to help the public schools of urban America." Asked if presented the chance as president he would urge his solicitor general to file a friend of the court brief in support of the constitutionality of the Cleveland voucher program, Bradley responded, "I haven't decided that."

• Should school choice be regarded as a new and radical experiment? Well, it isn't for people with money. At least that's the position of **Howard Fuller**, former superintendent of the Milwaukee public schools, who says wealthy folks have been routinely choosing their children's schools for centuries. School choice only becomes a problem when there's a proposal to extend it to poor parents.

Speaking last month with great passion and personal conviction at the Heritage Foundation, Fuller noted the hypocrisy of those who deny school choice for poor children while exercising it for their own children. If a school isn't good enough for their children, why is it good enough for anyone's children? he asks.

In a society where money talks, Fuller believes vouchers would give poor

children clout. Competition is a powerful stimulant for better service, he says, noting that it wasn't until Toyota captured a sizeable share of the auto market that "quality" became "job 1" for American automakers. Only when the poor are given the opportunity to take their money and go someplace else, will the system respond with real reform.

• Home schoolers showed they have what it takes to get the attention of political heavyweights. Six presidential candidates, including GOP frontrunner **George W. Bush**, addressed the Proclaim Liberty conference of the Home School Legal Defense Association last month in Washington, DC. "We view home schooling as something to be respected and something to be protected," Bush told the crowd.

In connection with the conference, the U.S. Senate, by unanimous consent, passed a resolution proclaiming September 19-25 as National Home Education Week. The resolution states that the country recognizes the importance of family participation in education as well as the "fundamental right of parents to direct the education and upbringing of their children."

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