

cape Council for American Private Education outlook

"Voice of the Nation's Private Schools"

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Private Schools Above Average on International Tests

American private school students scored significantly above the national average on tests that measured math and science performance in 38 countries around the world. The private school scores were so impressive that had they been the norm for the nation, they would have propelled the U.S. position in international rankings from 19th to 12th place in math and from 18th to 6th place in science.

The results of the repeat of the Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS-R) were released December 5 by the National Center for Education Statistics. First administered in 1995 to students in grades 4, 8, and 12, and then in 1999 to grade 8 alone, the tests allow for cross-country and within-country comparisons over two points in time. For example, the results reveal the relative international standings of U.S. eighth graders in 1999 and in 1995, and

also allow a look at how 1995 U.S. fourth graders fared four years later.

U.S. students scored above the international average in both mathematics and science. The U.S. score of 502 in math outpaced the global average of 487, and in science the country's 515 compared favorably with the 488 worldwide mean. However, according to Dr. Gary Phillips, acting commissioner of education statistics, between 1995 and 1999, "there was no change" in eighth-grade performance in either subject, and the international ranking of U.S. performance in both subjects was "lower for eighth graders in 1999 than it was for fourth graders four years earlier."

Unlike its predecessor, TIMSS-R involved a large enough private school cohort to permit comparisons with public schools. The report sums up the comparisons this way: "In both mathematics and science in 1999, the average achievement

score of U.S. eighth-grade nonpublic school students was higher than the average of their peers in U.S. public schools." Specifically, while public school students scored 498 in math, private school students scored 526, a number identical to the 12th-ranked Russian Federation. In science, public school students scored 510 and private school students 548, just behind the Republic of Korea, which placed fifth.

The report claims that the research literature offers two possible reasons for the public/private performance differences. One is that "the two types of schools differ in the quality of the education offered to students." The other is a possible difference in "the socioeconomic status of the students." In the end, however, the report eschews any explanation, settles simply on documenting the achievement differences, and suggests that in the future a more "thorough analysis of the data ... may reveal important insights into possible reasons for the observed differences."

The complete report, titled *Pursuing Excellence*, is available on the Web at the following address: <http://nces.ed.gov/timss/timss-1/>



TIMSS-R Science Average Scores of Eighth-Grade Students

Chinese Taipei	569
Singapore	568
Hungary	552
Japan	550
Korea, Republic of	549
U.S. Private Schools	548
Netherlands	545
Australia	540
Czech Republic	539
England	538
Finland	535
Slovak Republic	535
Belgium-Flemish	535
Slovenia	533
Canada	533
Hong Kong SAR	530
Russian Federation	529
Bulgaria	518
U.S. All Schools	515
New Zealand	510
Latvia-LSS 2	503
Italy	493
Malaysia	492
Lithuania 3	488
Thailand	482
Romania	472
(Israel)	468
Cyprus	460
Moldova	459
Macedonia, Republic of	458
Jordan	450
Iran, Islamic Republic of	448
Indonesia	435
Turkey	433
Tunisia	430
Chile	420
Philippines	345
Morocco	323
South Africa	243

- Scores similar to U.S.
- Significantly higher than U.S.
- Significantly lower than U.S.



New Book Envisions "Structured" School Choice Seeks to reconcile diverse values and need for national identity

The tony community of Bedford, NY, seems an unlikely place for an all-out clash over Satanism. Yet, in 1995 two religious Catholic women claimed that the Bedford Central School District promoted pagan and satanic practices by hosting a fourth-grade club focusing on the fantasy card game *Magic*. Their challenge quickly expanded and eventually evolved into a lawsuit charging the district with undermining the religious beliefs of students. The complaint's final catalogue of alleged First Amendment offenses by Bedford public schools included fostering occultism and New Age spirituality, instructing students to fashion images of a Hindu god, sponsoring earth-worship rituals, and encouraging superstitious practices (specifically, telling students to alleviate anxiety by placing "worry dolls" under their pillows).

Predictably, the case galvanized activists on both sides of this prickly constitutional issue. Some sided with the plaintiffs, claiming the school district was undermining their values and beliefs and trampling their right to direct the upbringing of their children, while others accused the plaintiffs of trying to censor the curriculum, restrict free speech, and impose their narrow views on others. In due time, a district court ruled for the parents in some matters and for the Bedford public schools in others. The case is currently under appeal and may be headed for the U.S. Supreme Court.

The Answer: School Choice

The Bedford story plays a prominent role in Rosemary Salomone's *Visions of Schooling*, a fair, thorough, and scholarly work that suggests school choice is the way to deal with the grow-

ing number of conflicts that arise in a society where consensus on values seems to be unraveling. For Salomone, a professor of law at St. John's University, Bedford "could be Anytown, USA," where well-meaning, intelligent people have conflicting views about the proper content and purpose of public education. In recent decades in school districts across the country, writes Solomone, disagreements have erupted over such inflammatory matters as moral

absolutes, AIDS awareness, sex education, school prayer, the distribution of condoms, and the appropriateness of homosexual activity. Such conflicts, contends Solomone, could be abated, and religious liberty rights could be protected, if parents were provided more opportunities to select schools that reflect their deeply held beliefs and values. "Perhaps the most striking lesson to be learned

from Bedford," she writes, "is that the real devil in such struggles may be the common school itself, an outdated, one-size-fits-all approach to compulsory education...."

Myth of the Common School

Salomone systematically explores what Charles Glenn calls the "myth of the common school" — the notion that public education is value neutral and its curriculum in accord with the beliefs of most Americans. She argues that government-operated schools are not the only way for society to ensure an educated citizenry, and makes the case for a system of educational governance centered in the family.

The central question for Solomone is this: How can education in a free and pluralistic society "promote a national identity while at the same time preserving community and individual interests?"

In other words, how can it make of the many, one, while at the same time maintaining the rights of the many to freedom of belief? Her answer is "structured family choice." She argues quite persuasively that providing parents more choice in education "may offer the most effective means for balancing the individual, community, and societal interests inherent in the values debate."

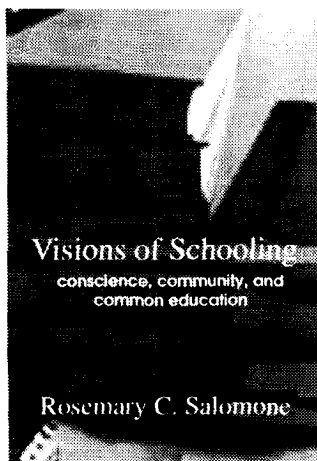
Some State Oversight

Professor Solomone by no means proposes a complete break between schooling and the state. Her choice plan includes public schools, charter schools, and tuition subsidies for low-income parents to choose religious schools. Private schools that elect to participate in the government-subsidized system would be subject to certain conditions, including "performance standards and a mechanism for assuring that students are afforded the skills, character traits, and knowledge that foster democratic citizenship." Under the latter condition, if a school were ever established that espoused extreme religious, political, or social views in conflict with America's core civic values, it would not be eligible for support by the state.

Via Media

Salomone calls structured school choice "a relatively modest [proposal] that attempts to balance competing demands for family choice and democratic citizenship." She further describes it as a *via media*, a middle way that "respects both the *pluribus* and the *unum* in our civic culture." To be sure, her proposal is a bold plan and not without risk. But as she puts it in the book's concluding sentence, "This could be the nation's grand experiment for the new millennium."

Visions of Schooling is available at Amazon.com



Reports Tout Choice and Universal Education Credits

Stripped to its essentials, the reasoning in two new reports from the Cato Institute is easy to follow: Parent involvement in education is good; school choice promotes parent involvement; universal education tax credits expand school choice; therefore, universal education tax credits are good.

More Than Grades, the first of the two, claims that research conducted over the past 20 years shows "a clear link between parental involvement in a child's studies and student achievement." Yet, for the most part, schools have ignored the research, treating parents as "little more than monitors for class trips, coordinators of cookie sales, and boosters of athletic events." A notable exception to the practice of ignoring parents may be found in school choice programs — including charter schools, publicly funded vouchers, and privately funded tuition grants.

Phillip Vassallo, the report's author, provides considerable evidence that choice boosts parent involvement. For example, compared with other parents in Milwaukee, parents participating in the city's voucher program are significantly more likely to work with their children on homework, to participate in school activities, to receive information from the school about their children's performance and behavior, and to initiate contact with the school. If keeping track of a child's work and lending a helping hand are important ways for parents to help children grow, then those who choose their children's schools seem to have an edge. "Parents in choice programs become empowered in their

critical role of supporting their children's education," writes Vassallo.

His survey of studies of the country's major school choice programs identifies other advantages for participating parents and children. A striking one is that parents in choice programs believe their schools are more likely to reflect the three essential qualities they look for in schools: safety, discipline, and instructional quality.

The report concludes by calling parental involvement "the key to educational excellence." Choice works, says the report, because "when parents have a choice, they take more responsibility for their decisions and have a greater stake in the success of their children's school." Because parents are "squarely at the forefront of education reform," state lawmakers should "return control of education to parents through mechanisms like tax cuts and universal tuition tax credits." Such measures would "transform American schooling by increasing parental involvement and providing for children the education they deserve."

And that provides a smooth transition to the second Cato report, *Reclaiming Our Schools*. Darcy Ann Olsen from Cato and Matthew Brouillette from the Mackinac Center for Public Policy offer a bold plan for expanding parental control of schools through universal education tax credits. Under their proposal, a parent, individual, or corporation would receive a "dollar-for-dollar reduction in tax liability for money spent on tuition." A per-child credit would be available for up to one-half the state's average per-pupil expenditure, and the total amount of the credit would not exceed the taxpayer's or company's tax liability.

The authors claim that

low-income parents with little or no tax liability would benefit from corporate or individual contributions to a tuition pool.

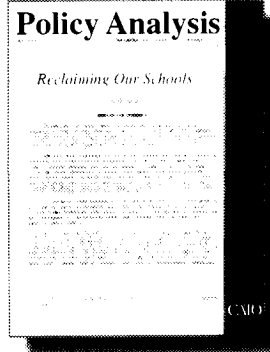
"Given the choice of paying taxes for general services or directing some of those taxes to scholarships, many people will prefer to assist students." They cite the success of the Arizona scholarship tax credit program, which in 1999 raised nearly \$14 million from about 32,000 individual donors. Arizona allows tax

credits of up to \$500 for contributions to tuition scholarship programs (see chart), which then distribute the funds to individual students. Taxpayers are even allowed to earmark the money for particular children, as long as the children are not their own.

Olsen and Brouillette believe that universal education credits are less likely than vouchers to trigger additional government control of private schools. "Because parents pay tuition with their own money rather than public funds, legislators should have no more incentive to regulate independent schools than they do currently." And they say the benefits of tax credits don't end there. Empowering parents, reducing the costs of private education, spurring school improvement, and raising scholarship money for needy children are among the proposal's pluses.

Reclaiming Our Schools concludes that because American education limits parental choice in education, it ultimately fails "to provide children with the education they deserve." One sentence in the final paragraph is particularly poignant: "It is time to drag America's 19th-century education system...into the 21st century, where decentralization, parental responsibility, and flexibility can create unprecedented opportunities for learning." Whether America is ready to achieve that end through universal education credits is yet to be seen.

The two policy papers are available on the Web at www.cato.org.



1999 Donations to Representative Tuition Programs in Arizona

Adventist Scholarships, Inc.	\$163,563
Catholic Tuition Org. (Phoenix)	\$4,672,380
Christian School Tuition Org.	\$2,816,791
Episcopal Schools Foundation	\$320,081
Independent Schools Foundation	\$329,710
Jewish Day School Fund	\$371,332
Lutheran Education Foundation	\$355,733
Montessori School Tuition Org.	\$43,400

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• The U.S. Supreme Court last month refused to hear the case of a blind child with cerebral palsy who was denied on-site state-provided special education services because he attended a religious school. The high court let stand a decision by the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, which found no legal or constitutional fault with an Oregon regulation that required a school district electing to provide special education and related services to a specific child attending a private school to do so in a religiously neutral setting. The Reedsport School District was willing to provide certain services to the student at a neutral site, and the circuit court found that neither the U.S. Constitution nor the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) required the district to do otherwise.

A positive postscript is that the state school board voted December 7 to repeal the regulation in question.

• A new report from the National Center for Education Statistics shows

that children who attend private kindergartens score higher on tests of reading and math than children who attend public kindergartens. The higher scores are recorded on tests administered both in the fall (before the school has had much chance to affect performance) and the spring.

The Kindergarten Year presents findings from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study of the kindergarten class of 1998-99. The report examines the gains children make in skills and knowledge between the fall and spring of kindergarten year and attempts to determine whether those gains are related to a host of child, family, and program variables. About 15 percent of the 22,000 children in the study attended kindergarten in private schools.

The full report is available on the NCES Web site at <http://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/>.

• On December 7, The Heritage Foundation gathered some high-powered school choice advocates to discuss the movement's future. Despite the ballot setbacks in California and Michigan, participants were optimistic, justifying their optimism by citing court successes, comprehensive ad campaigns, growing support within the mainstream media, and the formation of the Black Alliance for Educational Opportunity.

Terry Moe, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, said the main lesson from the state initiative defeats is, "Don't do initiatives." He said the research on statewide ballot measures shows that proposals that the polls indicate to be initially popular tend to lose support during the campaign. The reason?

Strong, vocal opponents merely have to raise doubts about the measure. When in doubt, people tend to play it safe, voting against change and for the status quo.



Panelists at the Heritage Foundation. From left, Clint Balick, Terry Mae, Howard Fuller, and Joseph Overton.

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