



Making Schools Work Better for all Children

Newsire - December 12, 2000

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**CER Newsire Vol. 2, No. 44
December 12, 2000**

SCHOOL CHOICE: As transmitted yesterday in CER's Special Newsire, the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals has set the stage for a likely U.S. Supreme Court hearing on school choice -- the penultimate in court cases that school choice proponents have long hoped for and anticipated.

The issue in such a case would likely be focused on whether or not aid to parents for educational services (no matter whether the services are religious or non-sectarian in nature) passes the constitutional test of whether a law "respects the establishment of religion, or prohibits the free exercise thereof" - the "Establishment Clause."

While there are many opinions in this matter, there is already a solid record of government funding for private services such as, for example, existing government vouchers for low-income parents to help fund daycare at private and parochial facilities. Thousands of students in higher education also use federally funded Pell grants, National Direct Student Loans and GI benefits to attend universities ranging from Notre Dame to Yeshiva University. The decision can be viewed at <http://pacer.ca6.uscourts.gov/opinions/main.php>. Also check out CER's recent paper [Nine Lies About School Choice](#), which counters the most popular arguments against school choice.

Other related links:

- [CER CONDEMNS COURT RULING DENYING QUALITY EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES](#), Statement by CER President Jeanne Allen, December 11, 2000
- Excerpts from [SCHOOL VOUCHER PROGRAM RULED UNCONSTITUTIONAL](#) by Andrea Billups, *Washington Times*, December 12, 2000
- Excerpts from [RULING VOIDS USE OF VOUCHERS IN OHIO SCHOOLS](#), By Jodi Wilgoren, *New York Times*, December 12, 2000

CHARTER SCHOOLS: More than 2,000 charter school operators and advocates convened at the National Charter Schools Conference hosted by the U.S. Department of Education, and for two days representative of the nation's charter schools were treated - largely by federal dollars - to a wide variety of technical and support workshops and bolstered by the networking and fanfare that accompanies most such conferences.

Two sour notes were struck, one on Saturday morning, when hundreds convened to hear recent

research findings about charter schools. In addition to some general information presented, the U.S. Department of Education-funded researchers (which include the American Federation of Teachers) told the audience that charters had failed to be innovative, that they weren't doing anything very different than most other schools, and recited research from a fairly limited set of studies. Those studies are outweighed, in our view, by the overwhelming number of studies citing the positive effects of charters around the country. A recent look at charter school studies shows a different story.

The other note of discord came from Education Secretary Richard Riley who, for the third year in a row, delivered a scathing attack on those who support full school choice (or vouchers), calling them "divisive," "a distraction," "a mistake," and "fool's gold." He also noted that those who support providing educational opportunities for students in this manner are trying to "undermine our public schools."

Rather than only focus on the relevant topic - which was charter schools - the fact that Riley finds it necessary year after year to divide audiences over these issues is additional proof that the federal role in education is more political than substance.

STANDARDS: Of course, that latter point is clear from the U.S. Department of Education's own press release regarding last week's Third International Mathematics and Science Study - Repeat (TIMMS-R). The headlines from the major newspapers said it best: "U.S. Students Backslide" (*Wall Street Journal*), "Students in U.S. Do Not Keep Up" (*NY Times*), "Americans Just Above Average" (*Washington Post*), "U.S. Math, Science Students Still Trail" (*LA Times*), "[Students in U.S. Lag](#)" (*Washington Times*), "U.S. Students Found Trailing" (*Philadelphia Inquirer*).

The press release from the U.S. Department of Education? Showing a preference for "spin" rather than analysis, Secretary Riley boldly declared, "Our students are successfully learning more math and science every year they're in school" - despite the fact that U.S. fourth grade students taking the test four years ago had higher international rankings than this year's eighth grade students. In other words, the longer they stayed in American schools, the worse they did in international comparisons.



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