Show Us the Money!

Maybe the theme of this issue shouldn’t be “Can Public Education Survive?” That’s a no-brainer when nine out of every 10 children in the United States attend public schools.

The real question should be “Can Public Education Thrive?” That’s not so easy to answer at a time when public schools are struggling to meet the demands of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act as well as growing competition from private and charter schools.

Critics like to highlight the fact that thousands of schools have failed to meet NCLB’s requirements for “adequate yearly progress,” and certainly there are a lot of schools and school districts, particularly in urban settings, that can use a helping hand.

That’s the point that Sally McConnell, NAESP’s associate director for government relations, makes in presenting the recommendations of an NAESP task force for the forthcoming reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, presently represented by NCLB. Underlying the recommendations is a set of principles, of which two are particularly significant. One emphasizes the need for “sufficient funding for federal mandates” and the other insists that “public funds must be preserved for public schools.”

A recent report from the Century Foundation and Center for American Progress states that “the quest for educational excellence means that more money has to be spent on public schools—to reduce class size, attract better teachers, modernize school infrastructure, provide more preschool and after-school programs, and help lagging schools meet NCLB requirements.”

The report goes on to acknowledge that “the public is far more interested in implementing more accountability in public schools and in providing more resources to the public school system than in moving to a voucher-based system.”

Largely frustrated in efforts to provide publicly financed vouchers for private schools, critics of public schools are turning to charter schools as their “weapon of choice.” These schools, permitted by some states to operate independently with public funding, are a mixed blessing for American education. Where their purpose is to serve the needs of a diverse population, they complement the role of public schools. But too often when they are established for other purposes, the result is de facto segregation. It’s interesting to note that the most recent Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll found that 50 percent of the respondents believed that charter schools are free to teach religion and 58 percent believe they can select students on the basis of ability.

Considering the limitations under which many public schools operate, how does their performance compare with private schools? It’s a question that educational statistician Henry Braun finds deserving of an answer “based on more than anecdote and hearsay.” What he has done to “level the playing field” of achievement data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which generally indicate poor performance of public schools, is to subject the data to a sophisticated analysis based on a variety of characteristics associated with academic achievement. In doing so, he found the achievement gap greatly reduced—and in one case actually reversed in favor of the public schools.

Don’t forget NAESP’s 2007 Convention and Exhibition, from March 29 to April 2 in Seattle. You’ll find a rundown on the city’s attractions and major program events in this issue that we hope will convince you to fill out the registration form and start packing.
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