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HOW MEMBERS OF CONGRESS EXERCISE SCHOOL CHOICE

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The United States Senate is considering S. 846, the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*. This is the Clinton Administration's proposal to revamp the nation's public schools. Passed by the House of Representatives last October, *Goals 2000* unfortunately does little to make it easier for parents to choose the best school for their children. Instead, it adds a new layer of federal red tape on top of the many government regulations that often stifle reform efforts.¹

Programs to give parents greater powers to choose a school for their children is now pending in the legislatures of many states. Many reformers of both parties at the state level believe choice is the most promising approach at the state and local level to force bureaucratic public school districts and schools to introduce reforms to remain competitive.² To be sure, school choice already is an option for Americans if they have the financial power to exercise it. But lower-income families are trapped in often substandard government schools—especially in America's inner cities. School choice proposals empower poor parents by giving them the means to choose safe, drug-free, effective schools for their children.

Despite the increasing popularity of choice programs at the state level, the sponsors of *Goals 2000* have resisted amendments to include provisions to foster choice at the state and local level. Among the arguments used by these opponents of choice is that permitting children to leave the public school system might undermine the public schools. Hence they oppose steps to make it financially possible for lower-income parents to choose private education.

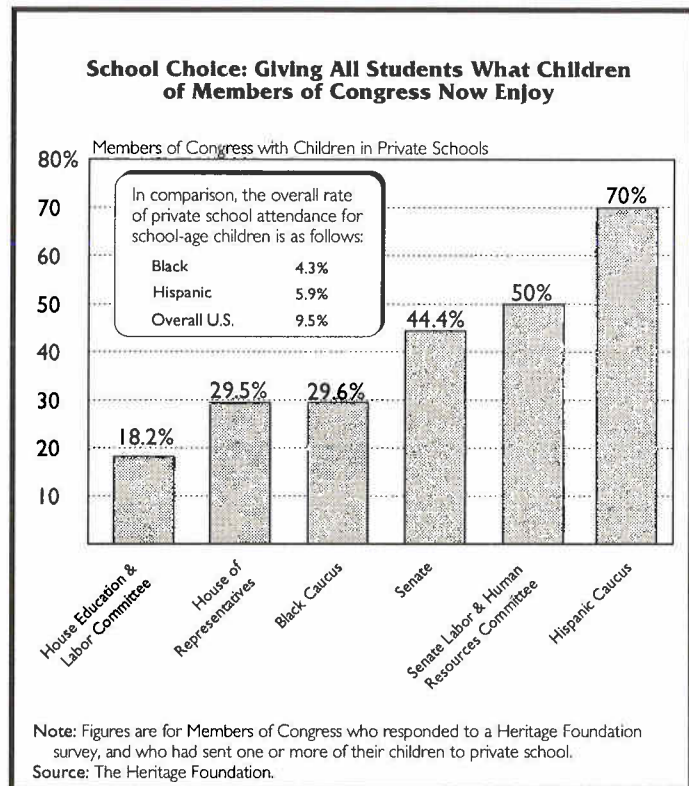
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- 1 For a detailed discussion of *Goals 2000*, see Allyson M. Tucker, "Goals 2000: Stifling Grass Roots Education Reform," Heritage Foundation *Issue Bulletin* No. 182, July 14, 1993; and William F. Lauber, "Goals 2000: The 'Washington Knows Best' Approach to School Reform," Heritage Foundation *Issue Bulletin* No. 185, November 16, 1993.
 - 2 See Angela Hulseley, *School Choice Programs: What's Happening in the States*, 1993 Edition, Heritage Foundation, March 1993.

The curious thing about this line of argument is that many high-ranking public officials who oppose helping poor children escape unsafe and ineffective urban public schools often choose to send their own children to elite private schools. These include President Clinton, who sends his daughter, Chelsea, to the exclusive Sidwell Friends School; Vice President Al Gore, whose four children all attend private schools; and the “shadow senator” of the District of Columbia, Jesse Jackson, whose daughter, Jacqueline, attends a private school.

CHOICE IN CONGRESS

This sharp distinction between the public position of opponents of school choice and their own private decisions regarding their own children extends to the U.S. Senators and Representatives who are considering *Goals 2000*. To discover how many congressional members exercise private school choice for their own children, Heritage Foundation staff conducted a survey among Members of Congress. Heritage staff have found that while 9.5 percent of U.S. school-age children nationwide are in private schools, some 44.4 percent of U.S. Senators and 29.5 percent of U.S. Representatives who have children and responded to the survey have sent their children to private schools.³ Fifty percent of Senate Republicans and 39.5 percent of Senate Democrats have opted to send their children to private schools, as have 36 percent of House Republicans and 25.2 percent of House Democrats. The numbers are even more surprising in the House and Senate Committees that draft America’s school reform legislation. Fifty percent of Democrats and 50 percent of Republicans on the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee, for instance, and 25 percent of Republicans and 14.3 percent of Democrats on the House Education and Labor Committee, took the decision to send their children to private schools.



Finally, while only 5.9 percent of Hispanic Americans nationwide and 4.3 percent of black Americans nationwide send their children to private schools, a surprising 70 percent of members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and 29.6 percent of the Congressional Black Caucus decided to send their children to private schools. Yet, both caucuses have been strangely silent on school choice proposals.⁴

- 3 It should be noted that when comparing survey samples to the general population, only overall population figures for private school attendance are available. Thus, the percentage of parents who send one of their children to private school may differ from the overall population rate.
- 4 This is despite the fact that 76 percent of African Americans and 67 percent of Hispanic Americans favor taking some money from public schools and giving it to parents so they can send their children to the public, private or parochial school of their choice. See *The People’s Poll on Schools and School Choice: A New Gallup Report*, November 1992, p. 6.

METHODOLOGY

Heritage interviewers asked every congressional office three questions:

- 1) Does the Member have any school-age children?
- 2) (If “no,”) Does the Member have any children at all?
- 3) Do any of the Member’s children attend, or have they ever attended, private schools?

If the information was not immediately available, interviewers called back at least three times to request a response to the survey.

In the survey tabulation, all Members of Congress who have, at one time or another, sent at least one of their children to a private school are considered to have chosen the private school option. Included in this category, therefore, are Members who have sent some children to public as well as some to private schools.

Members who do not have children, or have children who are not yet old enough to attend school, were *not* included when the final percentages were tallied. The “No Response” category includes Members or congressional staff who either refused to give information on where their children attend or have attended school, as well as offices that simply did not return repeated phone calls.

CONGRESSIONAL SCHOOL CHOICE: WHERE CONGRESSMEN SEND THEIR CHILDREN TO SCHOOL					
Legislative Body	<i>Private</i>	<i>Public</i>	<i>No Response</i>	<i>No School-Age Kids</i>	<i>Response Rate by %</i>
U.S. Senate	32	40	23	5	77
Republicans	17	17	8	2	81.8
Democrats	15	23	15	3	73.2
Senate Labor and Human Resources	6	6	3	2	82.4
Republicans	3	3	1	0	85.7
Democrats	3	3	2	2	80
U.S. House of Representatives	66	158	125	86	71.3
Republicans	32	57	53	34	69.9
Democrats	34	101	72	52	72.2
House Education and Labor	4	18	11	5	71
Republicans	2	6	6	1	60
Democrats	2	12	5	4	78.3
Hispanic Caucus	7	3	2	3	87
Black Caucus	8	19	4	7	89

