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## HOW MEMBERS OF CONGRESS PRACTICE SCHOOL CHOICE

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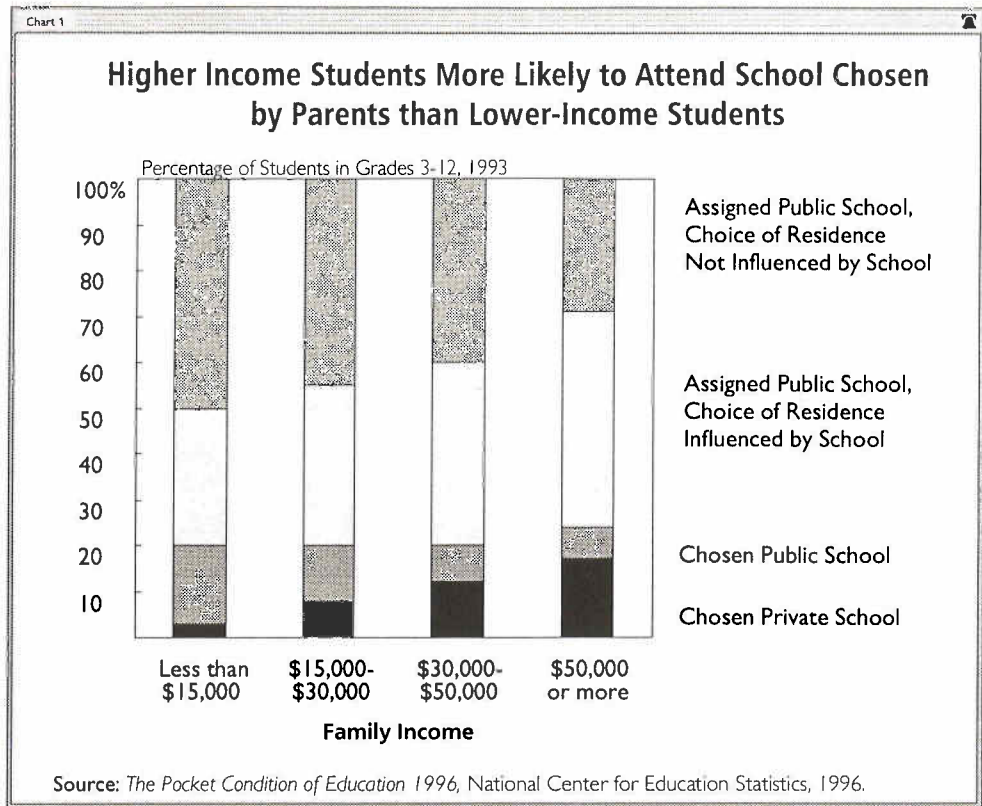
As millions of American children head off to school and Congress returns from its recess, school choice once again will step to the forefront of legislative debate. The issue is capturing greater bipartisan support in Congress as serious problems mount for the nation's inner-city public schools. In fact, Congress soon will consider four separate pieces of legislation designed to establish pilot school choice programs across America. These bills, which contain provisions that would offer scholarships and other financial opportunities for children to attend the schools of their parents' choice,<sup>2</sup> are designed specifically to help Americans with low or moderate incomes who find it difficult or impossible to afford private school education as an option for their children.

How well-received will these school choice proposals be among Members of the 105th Congress? For an indication, researchers at The Heritage Foundation conducted a survey in June and July of 1997. The underlying questions behind the survey were (1) How do Members of Congress

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- 1 Claire Gabriel and Katie O'Scannlain, Research Department interns at The Heritage Foundation, contributed to this paper.
  - 2 The American Community Renewal Act, the District of Columbia Student Opportunity Scholarship Act, the Safe and Affordable Schools Act, and the Education Savings Accounts for Primary and Secondary School Expenses Act. The American Community Renewal Act, introduced by Representatives J. C. Watts (R-OK), James Talent (R-MO), and Floyd Flake (D-NY) and Senators Spencer Abraham (R-MI) and Joseph Lieberman (D-CT), would create 100 "renewal communities" in low-income urban areas and feature pilot school choice programs. The District of Columbia Student Opportunity Scholarship Act of 1997, introduced by Representatives Richard Armev (R-TX), William Lipinski (D-IL), and Floyd Flake (D-NY) and Senators Dan Coats (R-IN), Joseph Lieberman (R-CT), and Sam Brownback (R-KS), would give vouchers to some of the District's poorest students to attend the school of their choice. The Safe and Affordable Schools Act, introduced by Senator Paul Coverdell (R-GA), includes school choice demonstration projects for children who wish to escape unsafe schools and provisions to encourage states and localities to design school choice programs. Private school tax breaks introduced by House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-GA) and Senator Coverdell, would allow parents to make tax-free withdrawals from an education savings account to use toward their children's education. Families could put \$500 a year into those accounts.

choose to educate their own children and (2) Do their choices reflect the general American population?<sup>3</sup>

Nationally, only 14.1 percent of school-age children (including 8 percent of black American children and 8 percent of Hispanic children) attend private schools.<sup>4</sup> The remaining 85.9 percent attend public schools either by choice or because their families cannot afford private school education. In fact, rather than being a real option for parents to place their children in the educational environment that



is best for them, school choice today is largely a function of income. As Chart 1 illustrates, families with annual incomes over \$50,000 (which includes all Members of Congress) are more likely than families who make less than \$15,000 a year to send their children to private schools. The option to choose private school education simply is not there for children of the poor.

For Members of Congress, the private school option evidently is appealing. Of those who responded to the survey, 34.4 percent of the Representatives and 50 percent of the Senators with children who are school-age or older currently send or have sent at least one of their children to private school. It is no wonder, then, that some parents are asking Congress why, if the government believes public schools—especially public schools in the nation’s capital—are good enough for America’s children, these schools are not the schools of choice for most of those who oversee the federal government’s public education funding?

As Congress takes up the issue of school choice this session, Members will have several excellent opportunities to preach (and vote for) what they practice. Members who understand the importance of obtaining a quality education for their own children should make sure that the federal government offers American families—especially the inner-city poor—the same opportunities to choose that they themselves enjoy.

- 3 In 1994, The Heritage Foundation conducted a similar study which found that, while 9.5 percent of school-age children nationwide attend private schools, some 44.4 percent of Senators and 29.5 percent of Representatives who have children and responded to the survey sent their children to private schools. See Allyson Tucker and William Lauber, “How Members of Congress Exercise School Choice,” Heritage Foundation *F.Y.I.* No. 9, February 1, 1994.
- 4 Rosalind R. Bruno and Andrea Adams, “School Enrollment—Social and Economic Characteristics of Students: October 1995,” U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Population Characteristics, P20-492, October 1996, Table 5, p. 21. 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 actual percentage of parents who send at least one of their children to private school may differ from the overall population rate.

## THE HERITAGE FOUNDATION SURVEY

Like most parents, congressional parents want their children to be in an educational environment that is safe, motivating, and successful. They look for performance and accountability. And if Members of Congress want America's children to receive quality education regardless of their parents' economic well-being, one would expect those Members who value private education for their own children to support steps that would make private education a real option for other Americans. To discern how many Senators and Representatives exercise—or have exercised—the private school option, the Heritage survey posed the following questions to Members' staff employees:

- 1) Does the Member have any school-age children?
- 2) If the response was "no," does the Member have children?
- 3) Do any of the Member's children attend, or have they ever attended, private schools?

**Methodology.** If responses to the survey questions were not given immediately, interviewers called the Member's office at least three additional times to request a response. For purposes of survey tabulation, Members of Congress who have sent at least one of their children to a private school at one time or another were considered to have chosen the private school option. This category, therefore, includes Members who sent some of their children to public schools and others to private schools. It also includes Members whose children were, or are, home schooled.<sup>5</sup> The "No Response" category includes those Members (or their staffs) who either refused to indicate where their children attend or have attended school or who did not return repeated phone calls.

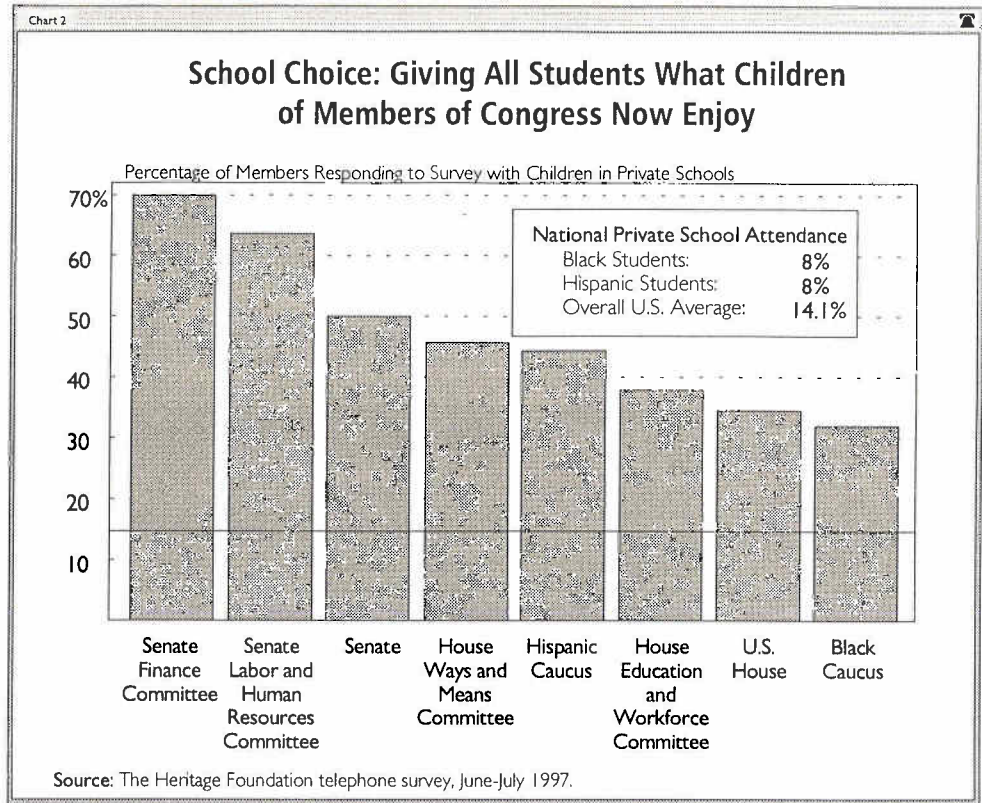
**Response Rate.** The response rate for the survey was 87.1 percent for members of the House of Representatives and 77 percent for members of the Senate (see Table 1).

Legislative Body	Private	Public	No School Age Children	No Response	Response Rate
<b>U.S. House of Representatives</b>	104	198	77	56	87.1%
Republicans	70	105	38	14	93.8
Democrats	34	92	39	42	79.7
Independent	0	1	0	0	100
<b>U.S. Senate</b>	32	32	13	23	77
Republicans	17	20	7	11	80
Democrats	15	12	6	12	73
<b>Senate Labor and Human Resources</b>	7	4	4	2	88.2
Republicans	5	2	1	1	88.8
Democrats	2	2	3	1	87.5
<b>Senate Finance</b>	7	3	1	9	55
Republicans	3	2	1	5	54.5
Democrats	4	2	0	4	55.5
<b>House Ways and Means</b>	12	14	11	2	95
Republicans	10	5	8	0	100
Democrats	2	9	3	2	87.5
<b>House Education and Workforce</b>	11	18	11	2	95.2
Republicans	7	13	2	0	100
Democrats	4	5	9	2	90
<b>Hispanic Caucus</b>	4	5	3	4	75
<b>Black Caucus</b>	8	17	6	7	81.5

Source: The Heritage Foundation telephone survey, June-July 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Members of Congress who do not have children or whose children are not yet old enough to attend school were not included in the "No" category when the final percentages were tallied.

**The Results.** Over 34 percent of those responding to the survey from the House of Representatives, and 50 percent of those in the Senate, send or have sent at least one of their children to a private school. Furthermore, members of congressional committees that have direct jurisdiction over educational issues are the most likely to send their children to private schools (see Chart 2). On the Senate side, 70 percent of the members of the Finance Committee whose offices responded have chosen private school education for their children, as have 63.6 percent of the members of the Labor and Human Resources Committee. In the House of Representatives, 46 percent of the members of the Ways and Means Committee who responded, and 37.9 percent of the members of the Education and Workforce Committee, took advantage of the opportunity to choose a private school.



In recent years, support for choice has skyrocketed among minorities. A recent survey by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies noted that 86.5 percent of African-Americans ages 26 to 35 (the age group most likely to have children) responded explicitly that they would support a voucher system to send their children to the private, parochial, or public school of choice.<sup>6</sup> Yet only 8 percent of black Americans and 8 percent of Hispanic Americans enroll their children in private schools.<sup>7</sup> The Heritage survey found that the patterns of school choice for members of the Congressional Black Caucus and Hispanic Caucus were more similar to those of the Congress overall than to those of the black and Hispanic populations in general. Over 32 percent of the members of the Congressional Black Caucus whose offices responded to the survey send their children to private schools. Similarly, 44 percent of the members of the Hispanic Caucus exercise this choice.

## DOUBLE STANDARDS

Despite the proportion of Members of Congress who send their own children to private schools, many Members still do not feel that all parents should be given this fundamental choice. Last year, a modest attempt by Representative Steve Gunderson (R-WI) to pass a small school choice plan for

6 David A. Bositis, "Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies 1997 National Opinion Poll: Children's Issues," Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, Washington, D.C., June 1997.

7 Bruno and Adams, "School Enrollment," *op. cit.*

the District of Columbia's low-income children passed the House by a vote of 241 to 177 but was weakened by Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee Chairman James Jeffords (R-VT), whose state is home to one of only two statewide school choice plans in the country. The bill eventually was killed in the Senate by Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA), who dismisses school choice as "snake oil."

Interestingly, 57.1 percent of the House Members who did not respond to The Heritage Foundation survey, 33.8 percent of Members without school-aged children, and 22.1 percent of House Members with children in private schools last year voted against a modest proposal to enact school choice in Washington, D.C.

A proposal authored by Senator Paul Coverdell (R-GA) in this year's tax bill would have allowed parents to invest their money in tax-free individual retirement accounts (IRAs) to pay for their children's future education in a public, private, or religious school of their choice. Senator Coverdell's proposal passed the Senate by a vote of 59 to 41 but was dropped from the tax legislation after President Bill Clinton sent Congress a letter saying he would veto such a measure. Curiously, 60.9 percent of those who did not respond to the Heritage survey opposed this measure, as did 38.5 percent of those without school-age children and 34.4 percent of Members who send their own children to private schools.

## CONCLUSION

Many Members of Congress view school choice as an opportunity for families to help their children escape the worsening ills of America's urban schools. Yet congressional opponents of effective school choice for America's families are quite likely to send their own children to private school. They and other opponents—such as President Clinton, whose daughter Chelsea attended the elite Sidwell Friends School in Washington, D.C., and Vice President Albert Gore, whose four children also all attend or have attended private schools<sup>8</sup>—offer little explanation of why the parents of children attending troubled inner-city schools should not be given the same choice.

Members of Congress should take this opportunity to expand the educational horizons of America's parents, especially low-income inner-city parents. In a free-market society that thrives on access to the best of everything through continual competition, it is time for Congress to make a quality education available to all children by extending the benefits of free-market competition to the selection of schools. Parental involvement is one of the keys to a child's academic success. By exercising academic choices and demanding accountability, all parents can become positively engaged in educating their children.

Thus, as Members of Congress take their own children back to school and prepare to vote on school choice legislation this fall, they must determine whether they are more committed to America's children or to the education establishment and the status quo. The various bills before Congress contain provisions that would help to rectify the disparity in school choice options by allowing low- and moderate-income parents to choose the private, public, or parochial schools they believe will best educate their children. Perhaps parents, as they watch these bills move through Congress, should compare their Senators' and Representatives' votes with the decisions their elected representatives have made for their own children's education.

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8 Tucker and Lauber, "How Members of Congress Exercise School Choice," *op. cit.*

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