



# The Parent Point

**A MONTHLY BRIEF FOR WASHINGTON'S PRIVATE SCHOOL COMMUNITY**

**Vol. II Number VIII**

**May 2002**

## Assistance for EVERY child

*On May 3, the Board of Directors of the Washington Federation of Independent Schools (WFIS) approved a position paper on the pending federal reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The following is an overview of the text, incorporating language and proposals from the affiliated Council for American Private Education (CAPE). A full version of the paper may be viewed on the Federation web site at [www.wfis.org](http://www.wfis.org).*

**T**his past winter when President Bush signed into law the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), a sweeping reform of the federal government's role in education resulted, targeting the goal that "no child shall be left behind." Congress intentionally retained (and strengthened) the provisions in the Act that guaranteed to children enrolled in the nation's private schools the benefits of that same promise. Even still, a significant segment of the K-12 population – namely, children with special needs – continues to wait for assistance.

This year, Congress and the President hope to bridge that gap through the federal re-write of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The Washington Federation of Independent Schools (WFIS) joins with its state and national affiliates in calling for the same equity in service for children placed by their parents in private schools as that which they have realized under ESEA. Previous IDEA amendments in 1997 replaced somewhat vague language governing services to children in private schools with a quantitative formula. The resulting state level interpretations eliminated the

opportunity for parentally placed private school children to participate equitably in the benefits of the Act. Although IDEA provides significant assistance to public school children in need of special education, it does not provide the same scope of service to children in private schools.

***In 1925, the U.S. Supreme Court recognized the fundamental right of parents to choose a private school by ruling that the state has no right to force a child to attend a public school. Children with special needs should not be forced to attend public schools in order to receive services that address those needs under IDEA. The issue of equity in IDEA services is a simple matter of social justice.***

WFIS calls for the inclusion of language that recognizes the right of special needs children in private schools to receive services that are equitable to those provided to comparable students in public schools.

*For more information on private school students and the IDEA, try the U.S. Dept. of Education's Office of Non-Public Education (ONPE) at [www.ed.gov/offices/OIA/NonPublic](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OIA/NonPublic) or e-mail Joni Hanna, our representative to the State Special Education Council, at [jhanna@bellvuechristian.org](mailto:jhanna@bellvuechristian.org)*

Specifically, we favor revisions that would ensure parental choice in the distribution of services and providers as well as a tax credit for educational expenses incurred by parents of special needs children.

Any changes should require that:

- Private school special needs students receive appropriate, on-site services;
- These students share proportionally in a significantly increased share of federal funds for IDEA;
- Professional development of teachers is assured for staff in private schools; and
- Parents of private school special needs students enjoy the same legal protections and due process procedures as their public school counterparts.

Unfortunately, the 1997 changes to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act resulted in a cruel misnomer for special needs students in private schools. No longer were they to be considered as individuals, but as a separate and unequal class of children with few individual rights and little say in the process. This reauthorization of IDEA provides Congress a unique opportunity to recraft an act that will truly provide enhanced opportunities for an important group of young learners. Our hope is that the reauthorized legislation will truly leave no child behind and will offer all children an equal opportunity to receive the special services required by IDEA. No parent should have to forfeit the right to choose a child's school in order to ensure that the child's special needs are met. Our offered proposals would go a long way toward realizing the equity that IDEA has always sought.