



### **Report from Washington, D.C.**

During the last week of September, Patrice Maynard, AWSNA leader for development and outreach, spent two days in Washington, D.C. with the CAPE (Council for American Private Education) Board and one day at the Private School Leadership meeting hosted by the Office of Non-Public Education in the Office of Innovation. Here is her report:

“Our CAPE meetings were, as usual, lively, and intense. The mood has changed dramatically at these meetings in the last year as the economic contraction deals a heavy blow to all our independent and faith-based schools. It is sobering. The regulations are coming out slowly on the \$6+ billion for educational reform and have defined all but about \$680 million for only public schools, with no possibility for any school money to come the way of independent education (not that our Waldorf schools take much from the government by way of grants, but others are quite dependent on Title I, II, and IV money and on IDEA funding, but it defines a prevailing attitude about independent schools). The focus for the new reform ideas for public schools are on high-risk students and on the development of three times the current number of charter schools.

The guidelines for the open grant money are not yet written, but we know that these grants will be made to organizations collaborating with schools. Irene McHenry, Executive Director of Friends Schools International, and Virginia McHugh, Executive Director of Maria Montessori Schools Internationale, spoke about collaborating to name our schools as "control group" schools, deliberately going in a different direction from the main stream to see if we could get funding for some groups of our schools, and share findings and work together to make some points to the world about knowing what works best for children (all these schools have a picture of the human being with a divine spark or eternal spirit - all are working against materialistic thinking, all are devoted to child observation as part of their technique). So, we'll see where that takes us when the regulations come out.

The point was made more than once that if there was a real interest in at-risk children, unencumbered by politics, then schools with below a 3% drop out rate and above a 90% college entry rate would be identified and at-risk students would be allowed to attend these regardless of their public or private schools status. This is much like the wildly successful DC voucher program which has been declared "done" as of the end of this year, making parents of students who have benefitted (largely Latin and African American students) from the program quite desperate.

As other school movements undergo a repeat of our Waldorf school experience, with charters imitating methods of every kind of independent school available, independent schools are closing and experiencing the drain from enrollment and teaching staff that seems inevitable when a charter opens nearby. The oxymoron of "religious charters" is picking up popularity. One can have a school that used to be a faith-based school, use the same building, avoid representing your faith, or mentioning your faith except in the context of world religion and with a careful eye to avoiding in those circumstances expressing any extra positive feeling about your own faith. After school, the government will allow the faith based community to use the buildings to teach voluntary religion lessons and will allow the doctrine of that religion to be taught. CAPE has formed an ad hoc committee for developing a new strategy for approaching independent education in America and I was asked to participate on it. There seems to be no avenue down which to walk to talk of these things with any meaning behind it. Once again, as last spring, there were no representatives from the administration who had time to come to speak with us. Once again the answer was, "Yes," and then a week before our meetings, the answer was changed to, "too busy."

At the Private School Leadership meeting immediately following the CAPE meetings, I was joined by David Mitchell, publisher of AWSNA Publications. He had been invited independently by connections he has in Washington. I was very glad to have the chance to introduce him to my CAPE colleagues and they to him. We heard Arne Duncan, the Secretary of Education, speak for ten minutes and then we got our pictures taken with him. Interestingly, just about every person who got up to speak boasted of having gone to an independent and faith-based school, demonstrating that our schools build the leaders of our country.

We also heard from Ron Clark of the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta Georgia. He has transformed a terrible neighborhood in downtown Atlanta and a blown-out old factory along the way into a vibrant independent school ("because we want innovation and you can't get that in public schools," he said, "And none of us wants to work in a place where being creative and original makes others feel bad.") He was inspiring, and David and I wondered if it might be worth organizing a meeting and a tour of our teachers with Ron Clark when we are at the conference this June. Ron is a bestselling author, an Oprah Winfrey choice, and an amazingly friendly soul with a 'Gomer Pyle' sort of affect – sweet and unassuming. Yet he is a relentless shaker and mover, committed to giving all children a chance to be a 'somebody.'

I will keep you posted on the ad hoc committee on new strategies as we go. The mood is in the direction of turning completely away from the government and finding another way, which has great potential."

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