

# ISSUE BRIEF

## Education Funding and Private Schools

**Although education is primarily a state and local government responsibility, the federal government has had an increasingly important role in supporting improvements in educational quality, particularly for disadvantaged students in public elementary and secondary schools.** The federal role in education is also critically important in providing students access to higher education without regard to financial need through the major student aid programs. Congress should increase federal funding for public education, including school construction, and defeat all private school voucher and education tax credit tax proposals.

Congress has supported the nation's public schools over the past few years by increasing federal education funding and by defeating private school voucher and education tax credit proposals. Congress, however, has failed to help local school districts strengthen our nation's education infrastructure.

**Congress should adequately fund elementary, secondary and higher education programs.** The Bush administration's fiscal year 2004 budget request included \$619 million less for the education programs authorized by the No Child Left Behind Act than the amount required to keep pace with inflation. This request also includes more than \$300 million for private school vouchers and education tax credits for private schools.

**The nation's public schools are overcrowded and often in poor condition, which strains teachers' abilities to teach and interferes with students' learning.** As local school districts across the country struggle to accommodate their rapidly rising enrollments, many public schools are being forced to set up classrooms in trailers, hallways and closets. Many of the nation's rural, suburban and urban public schools are not only overcrowded but are also in poor condition. According to the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), one-third of all public schools need extensive repair or replacement. The U.S. Department of Education found that local school districts would need to build 6,000 new schools by 2006 in order to accommodate rising enrollments and relieve overcrowding.

**Limited funding for K through 12 public education would be undermined by ill-conceived proposals for private school vouchers and tax credits.** These proposals would divert scarce funds from public schools, which are free and open to all students and accountable to parents and taxpayers alike, to support private schools that are not accountable to taxpayers and can exclude students for any reason, including ability to pay. According to the Department of Education, our nations' public schools currently enroll nearly 90 percent of all students in grades K through 12. In Milwaukee, the voucher program costs nearly \$60 million, diverting school funds from other districts and promoting property tax increases in as many as 238 districts, according to the 2001 Wisconsin legislative audit report. In Cleveland, research revealed that only 21 percent of voucher recipients come from district public schools, yet students in Cleveland are losing nearly \$15 million annually that would otherwise implement smaller classes, full-day kindergarten and reading improvement programs.

**Evidence shows that private school voucher programs have not raised student achievement.** In 2001, the GAO reported the official evaluations of Milwaukee and Cleveland "found little or no difference in voucher and public school students' performance." Studies of privately funded school voucher programs have found similar results.

**Federal education funding is also inadequate for higher education.** Pell grants continue to shrink as a portion of available student aid. College students are accruing enormous debts. The demand for student aid is only increasing as the jobless seek new education and training opportunities and college costs continue to rise.