

# FRIDAY BRIEF

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## Education Reform Bill Signed into Law

Muslim Americans have consistently rated education as a top policy priority in their communities. President Bush has also rated education as one of his top domestic priorities, and on Tuesday he signed into law a new education reform bill aimed at raising teacher standards and improving standardized test scores, among other provisions.

The legislation, titled the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, requires annual testing of students from the 3rd grade to the 8th grade in reading and mathematics skills. The results of each school will be published in state report cards. Parents will be allowed to transfer their children from schools with low scores that do not improve. The bill will also place the decision-making process at the local level, and frees up local school districts to spend some federal monies in any manner they see fit.

Expanded choice for parents is also a feature of the law. Parents can withdraw students from failing public schools and place them in better-performing public schools. As well, students in persistently dangerous schools can transfer to safer public schools. The law will also better inform parents about the quality of their child's school, their teachers, and their academic progress. The law will provide an estimated \$200 million for charter schools to help improve parental choice. However, a provision for school vouchers to allow students in failing public schools to attend private schools was not included in the law.

## Religious Organizations Should Exercise Free Speech Rights

The year 2002 will see very important mid-term elections in Congress, and the Muslim American community should once again be proactive in contacting candidates for these seats. One of the easiest places for candidates to meet and speak with large groups of voters is at Islamic centers or mosques.

However, many religious non-profit (501(c)3) organizations are under the impression that they will lose their non-profit tax status if they allow political candidates to address their congregations and distribute information on issues. While organizations are legally allowed to do this under existing tax law, most organizations are unaware of what they can and cannot do in regards to their tax status.

The Islamic Institute has joined several other organizations in calling for a clarification of what religious organizations can do under existing law. In a letter sent to Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, the Institute has requested that the Treasury Department or the Internal Revenue Service develop a fact sheet to list the lawful rights of non-profit religious organizations with regards to their participation in policy discussions with electoral candidates.

Also pending in the House of Representatives is the Houses of Worship Political Speech Protection Act, sponsored by Representative Walter B. Jones, Jr. (R-NC). The bill will allow religious organizations and houses of worship to engage in political campaigns and maintain their tax exempt status, as long as their participation on the campaigns is not a substantial part of the organizations' activities. The bill is currently awaiting a markup in the House Ways & Means Committee.