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Presumption should never make us neglect that which appears easy to us, nor despair make us lose courage at the sight of difficulties.

Benjamin Banneker

Department of Education Solicits Feedback

The Department of Education is continuing to conduct Twitter Town Hall [events](#). Since January, four events have been held on the topics such as digital learning, Hispanic education concerns, rural education, and President Obama's education budget request for 2013. A spokesman for the department noted that "Arne [Duncan] is fond of saying that the answers are not all going to come from Washington, D. Education policy is a convoluted and complicated arena. And I think Twitter is an excellent way for us to sort of tap into the collective wisdom that's out there." To learn more about the next event [click here](#).

Financial Aid Awareness Month

February has been designated Financial Aid Awareness Month. Despite the billions of taxpayer dollars spent annually on student financial aid, [studies](#) by the Heritage Foundation outline how college affordability continues to be an issue for parents and students. The Department of Education (Federal Student Aid Office) is holding a Twitter event hosted by Cathy Simoneaux, director of the Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid at the Loyola University of New Orleans, to answer participant's questions about the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). This event will take place at 6 p.m. on February 29. For more information [click here](#).

Pro-life Group Releases 2012 Strategy

On Thursday, Dr. Charmaine Yoest, president of Americans United for Life, announced the early [release](#) of model legislation and strategies for the pro-life movement. In hopes of continuing the positive momentum from 2011, Dr. Yoest issued an overview of this year's most promising initiatives. Last year, thirty two states considered eighty six pro-life measures and ultimately adopted twenty eight of them into law. Americans United for Life's top priorities are defunding abortion providers, providing women with accurate information, exposing the abortion industry's predatory tactics, and protecting the conscience rights of those who are opposed to abortion. To find more information about this initiative [click here](#).

New York Pilots New Teacher Evaluation

In a [statement](#), Secretary of Education Arne Duncan commended New York public schools for the development of an innovative teacher evaluation plan. Instead of peer or principal evaluation, the state will hire third party observers to conduct classroom visits and evaluations. Proponents of the plan say that third party observers will have the ability to be impartial, as well as, produce more accurate evaluations since the reviewers will be experts in the content area in which they conduct their study. Teachers who previously received ineffective ratings would receive approximately three visits per year. If the independent validator's findings confirmed that the teacher was indeed ineffective, the school

district would be able to expedite their dismissal. This would empower officials who previously had to collect an overabundance of documentation and fight unnecessary red tape to fire incompetent teachers which resulted in the infamous “[rubber rooms](#).” In 2010, New York City paid over 30 million dollars to 550 teachers who were relegated to reassignment centers (rubber rooms) while their cases went through the arbitration process. The new teacher evaluation proposal seeks to streamline the process and allow officials to more effectively staff classrooms.

Marriage Update

Although the New Jersey legislature passed a measure legalizing same-sex marriage, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie [vetoed](#) the bill. Gov. Christie seeks to place the measure on the November ballot. In a statement, he offered that “this is the only path to amend our State Constitution and the best way to resolve the issue of same-sex marriage in our state.” In Maryland, Governor Martin O’Malley has championed the legalization of same-sex marriage in the state. The bill has passed its biggest hurdle, the House of Representatives, and is headed to the Senate where it passed last year. The Governor is expected to sign the bill. For more information on marriage around the country [click here](#).

Efforts to Halt HHS Mandate

Opposition to the unconstitutional Health and Human Services “preventive services” mandate (part of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care [Act](#)). Conservative groups have rejected the one year [delay](#) and the February 10 “accommodation” as unworkable solutions to the problem. At least [seven](#) colleges have filed legal challenges to the mandate. Protestant higher education institutions such as the members of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities are considering [discontinuing](#) their student health insurance plans altogether if they are forced to offer coverage of contraception, sterilization and abortion inducing drugs. The Family Research Council and other groups have sent opposition letters to lawmakers. Efforts are underway in several [states](#) to introduce legislation barring implementation of the mandate. Over a dozen state attorney generals have sent letters to the HHS Secretary Sebelius urging her to reconsider her position. On February 15, over fifty Members held a press conference to demonstrate the bipartisan support for a legislative solution ([H.R.1179/S.1813](#)) to the problem. Next week, Majority Leader Harry Reid has indicated that he will allow a [vote](#) on an amendment offered by Senator Roy Blunt.

NYC Churches Update

After both sides sought various injunctions, New York City won a [reversal](#) that would allow only Bronx Household of Faith Church to continue worshiping in a public school facility until the resolution of the case. Approximately 67 congregations will be forced to find alternate meeting sites. The New York Board of Education has continued to maintain the position that public school facilities are available for rental after hours for any group but churches who wish to conduct services. Lawyers for the Alliance Defense Fund [contend](#) that the churches provide invaluable services for the communities where the schools are located, as well as, for the schools themselves.

In Case You Missed It:

[Weekly Market Update](#) provided by Jeff Beach of the [AACIS Investment Team at Merrill Lynch](#)

[Iranian Court Sentences Christian Pastor to Death](#)

[Elementary Student Prohibited from Distributing Religious Valentines](#)

[Justice Department Refuses to Defend DOMA](#)

[Education Issues Briefing for 2012 Candidates](#)



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