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I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do something that I can do.

Helen Keller

Senators Release ESEA Reauthorization Proposal

This week at a D.C. public school, Senator [Kay Hagan](#) (D-NC) and Senator Michael Bennet (D-CO), joined by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, unveiled their [proposal](#) for the upcoming ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Act) reauthorization. According to Senate [HELP](#) Committee Chairman Thomas Harkin, an ESEA reauthorization bill should be introduced by Easter. Bipartisan, intraparty differences have halted attempts to reauthorize the nation's public school education framework since 2007. A group of nine Democratic moderates endorsed the plan which mirrors the President's proposal in most aspects. Their plan similarly proposes a reward-based strategy for schools which demonstrate improvement and four turnaround options for failing schools (convert public school into charter school, close the school, replace half the faculty or introduce a new curriculum, or use a combined approach of teacher development and extended school day). One aspect of the plan that differs from the Administration's plan is a more flexible system of consequences for failing schools which would take into account schools that are unfairly labeled because of one underperforming segment of their student population. One component would hold teachers' colleges more accountable for their students' performance. Lastly, the plan calls for the adoption of merit pay strategies and additional compensation for extra duties. Critics surmise that while some parts may appeal to Republican lawmakers, they would most likely resist both continued investment in the Race to the Top program and the proposed turnaround models. In the upcoming weeks, several Senators plan to introduce legislation containing aspects of this proposal.

DOMA Update

Last Wednesday, President Obama instructed the Department of Justice no longer to defend the Defense of Marriage Act. The 1996 legislation stipulates that marriage is between a man and a woman and allows states to determine whether they recognize other states' decisions on the matter. In our nation's history, there have been other instances when Presidents have refused to defend duly enacted laws of the country. But in those cases, a lack of a reasonable argument or the infringement of the President's constitutional authority was at issue. Currently, there are several critical cases with looming deadlines which could have potentially broad implications on marriage case law. There are [several options](#) left to pursue in light of the Justice Department's abdication of the defense of traditional marriage. Either branch of Congress can intervene in this matter. House leadership is exploring its options in regards to defending DOMA. These options include appointing legal counsel, consulting with a Bipartisan Legal Advisory Group (includes majority and minority leadership), or offering a resolution. Since there are several pending cases with mid-March deadlines, the House leadership is expected to announce its plan soon. House Majority Leader Eric Cantor [stated](#) that they could take action to defend DOMA by as early as Friday.

Maryland Marriage Referendum Effort

A recent [25-21](#) vote in the Maryland state Senate underscores the divide in the state over the issue of gay marriage. Governor O'Malley has indicated that he will sign the bill since an amendment was added to protect the right of a church to refuse to marry same sex couples. Pro-marriage advocates are already circulating a [petition](#) to place this question on the ballot in the 2012 election. According to the state attorney general's office, at least 55,737 signatures are needed for a [voter referendum](#). To date, no states have legalized gay marriage by a voter referendum. The latest polls show that the majority of Maryland's citizens favor traditional marriage.

Supreme Court Free Speech Ruling

In an 8 – 1 ruling, the Supreme Court overwhelmingly voted to reverse a lower court decision against the infamous Westboro Baptist Church. The controversial church has made national headlines for protesting the funerals of fallen soldiers and other victims of tragedy. The church adheres to the belief that casualties in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are God’s punishment for the nation’s tolerance of homosexuality. In this case, Albert Snyder had previously been awarded over 5 million dollars in a judgment after he sued the group because of the protests at the funeral of his son Lance Corporal Matthew Snyder in 2006. Public sentiment seemed to be squarely with the Snyders as evidenced by the [support](#) of veterans groups, 48 states, and 42 senators. In the majority [opinion](#), Chief Justice John Roberts reasoned that although the protests were insensitive, the Court could not “react to that pain by punishing the speaker.” He also cited the fact that the group had a permit and was in compliance with the law during the protest. Furthermore, the standard of proof measure was not demonstrated by evidence proving the intentional inflicting of harm. In the only dissenting opinion, Justice Samuel Alito vehemently disagreed, writing that "our profound national commitment to free and open debate is not a license for the vicious verbal assault that occurred in this case." First amendment advocates hail this decision as a victory for freedom of speech.

Education and Workforce Committee Hearing

The House Education and Workforce held a hearing this week on the burdensome effect of federal regulations on education. In his opening [statement](#), Chairman John Kline spoke on the necessity of reducing federal regulations that annually require 7.8 million hours and over 235 million dollars to implement in state and school districts across the country. To view the archived webcast or read the experts’ testimony, click [here](#).

Budget Measure Avoids Government Shutdown

Lawmakers have agreed to a [two week budget measure](#) that will avert a government-wide shutdown as well as allow more time for debate. The last Continuing Resolution (CR) was set to expire March 4. In the event of a government shutdown, essential workers such as emergency and security personnel would still perform their jobs. Pension and Social Security checks would also still be sent to recipients. Officials have indicated that they have learned lessons from the 1994 shutdown that lasted 26 days and caused widespread disruptions. Those with jobs deemed [nonessential](#) would collect pay retroactively. In light of the disruptive affect and uncertain timetable for resolution, bipartisan agreement was reached quickly this week. Polling revealed that voters would blame both parties in the event of a shutdown. Although there is a general consensus about the need to reduce the deficit and rein in spending, the parties have offered diametrically opposed budget proposals. The Republicans have pledged to cut a minimum of 100 billion from the budget. Meanwhile, the Democrats maintain that the Republican cuts are too severe and would result in increased unemployment and harmful disruptions of essential programs and services to some demographics. Several of the 4 billion dollar budget cuts in the current two-week Continuing Resolution are in the area of education. Pundits argue that while the President’s budget also called for consolidation or cancellation of several of these ineffective educational programs, the funding should still be available for the Department of Education’s [discretionary use](#). Finally, [conservative](#) groups are watching to be sure that the new pro-life amendments ([Pence amendment](#), etc.) which were not included in this temporary measure, but were present in H.R. 1, are included in any future budget proposals.

In Case You Missed It:

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

[Speaker of the House Addresses National Religious Broadcasters](#)

[Christian Cabinet Minister Assassinated in Pakistan](#)

[UK Court Bans Christian Foster Parents](#)

