Education Secretary Lobbies for Increased Funding

On Tuesday, the House Committee on Education and the Workforce held a hearing entitled, “Reviewing the President’s Fiscal Year 2014 Budget Proposal for the U.S. Department of Education.” During the hearing, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan faced tough questioning from Republican committee members about the proposed funding increase in discretionary spending. In his opening statement, Chairman John Kline sought justification for the $97.1 billion budget request in light of the unchanging achievement rates. He suggested that mandated funding percentages for programs such as IDEA be met before launching new programs like the Preschool for All which would cost an estimated $75 billion over ten years. In his rebuttal, Ranking Member George Miller characterized the impending budget sequestration cuts as “draconian” and expressed consternation that the wealthy should not be compelled to pay their “fair share” in order to stave off program reductions. Secretary Duncan focused his remarks on the importance of the return on investment (ROI) from early childhood education and college completion. He contended that for every dollar spent on early childhood education 7 dollars are saved by taxpayers. Furthermore, he maintained that by providing “cradle to career” services students could have a chance to achieve a “solid, middle class life” instead of being caught in the school to prison pipeline. In one exchange, Rep. Virginia Foxx questioned the rationale behind citing America’s world rankings in per pupil funding and preschool enrollment as the basis for funding increases. A myriad of other issues such as charter schools, college completion rates, the Common Core Standards, dropout factories, higher education regulations, Pell Grant availability, student loan interest rates, and the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act were raised by Members. To watch the archived testimony, click here.

Indiana Puts the Pause on the Common Core

While the controversy over the implementation of the Common Core Standards (CCS) for English and mathematics instruction is growing in states across the country, Indiana Governor Mike Pence signed the Common Core “Pause” bill into law on May 15. This commonsense legislation requires that the state halt implementation of the standards until a comparison is conducted between the existing education standards and the CCS. The law also requires that best practices for development and assessment purposes be compiled, a fiscal impact study be conducted, and public meetings be held inviting input from the public prior to wholesale implementation. In order to compete for over $4.35 billion in Race to the Top funding, many states adopted the CCS before completion and without proper vetting which has been problematic as states have struggled to fulfill the promises made during the grant application process. Changes in state leadership combined with opposition from teachers unions, legislatures, parents, and educators have further complicated the issue.
Atheist Group Sues to Remove Bibles from Georgia’s State Parks
After his stay in a Georgia state park cabin, an activist from American Atheists complained that the presence of several Bibles was offensive. Officials removed the Bibles from all state parks in an effort to avoid litigation. After consulting with the state’s Attorney General, Governor Nathan Deal ordered that the Bibles be returned to the cabins. He contended that since the materials were purchased and placed by a private group (Gideons International) there was no conflict of interest or coercion by the state to engage in religious activities. Despite a strong statement from Georgia Governor Nathan Deal, the American Atheists announced that they will be sending their own materials to be placed alongside the Bibles so that “visitors can learn more about atheism when they visit Georgia’s beautiful state parks.”
The atheist group indicated that it will “happily” provide materials such as Why I Am Not a Muslim, Why I Am an Athiest, god is not Great, and The God Delusion. Increasingly, liberal groups such as the American Atheists, Americans for Separation for Church and State, and the Freedom From Religion Foundation have targeted local ordinances, monuments, and councils in small towns to erase all vestiges of religion from the public square.

Religious Liberty Victory in Montana
Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) lawyers have reached a settlement with the state of Montana that will enable children with disabilities to attend private, faith based preschools using the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) funding. Montana provides IDEA funding to children to attend private preschools since the state does not operate a public preschool program. Last year, some parents were dismayed to learn that they were ineligible for IDEA funds because they sought to place their children in religious preschool programs. In one specific instance, a family was informed that their daughter with hearing and speech impairments would need to transfer from her religious preschool to an alternative, private program mid-year. Despite favorable acknowledgements from a district education official and documented achievement gains for their daughter, they were denied the same IDEA funding that other students received. The parents contacted ADF in hopes of addressing the discriminatory policy. As a result of the lawsuit, state education officials reviewed and overturned the policy. This case is a great example of the need to challenge laws that erode students’ First Amendment rights.

Congressman Introduces Nationwide Fetal Pain Bill
On May 17, Rep. Trent Franks, a longtime pro-life leader in the House, reintroduced the D.C. Pain Capable Unborn Protection Act as the Unborn Child Protection Act (H.R. 1797). The bill was revised to include a nationwide ban on abortions performed after 20 weeks. Rep. Franks explained that “Knowingly subjecting our innocent unborn children to dismemberment in the womb, particularly when they have developed to the point that they can feel excruciating pain every terrible moment leading up to their undeserved deaths, belies everything America was called to be….This is not who we are.” He also acknowledged that the recent trial of Kermit Gosnell and the horrific conditions uncovered in his Philadelphia clinic spurred this latest effort to pass this particular legislation. Franks will chair a hearing in the House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution and Civil Justice on May 23. Although nine states have similar laws on the books, legal challenges have prevented implementation of the legislation.

In Case You Missed It:
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Obama Administration Approves Three More NCLB Flexibility Requests
59 Congress Members Demand Hagel Explain Meeting With Anti-Christian Extremist