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The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles, but to irrigate deserts.
C. S. Lewis

Massachusetts Halts Common Core Implementation
In November, Massachusetts joined over a dozen states that have slowed their transition to the Common Core Standards aligned assessments. While the Common Core has raised the math and English standards in some states, the CCS lowers the standards in Massachusetts. (As a result of state-led reforms in the 1990’s, Massachusetts has led the nation academically for years.) The state board of education has instituted a two year review of the CCS aligned PARCC tests comparing PARCC tests to the current and already proven Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exam. Education Commissioner Mitchell Chester, who also serves as the head of the CCS assessment board, stated that implementing the CCS tests by the 2014-2015 deadline would be “too precipitous a transition.” Opponents of the CCS standards have long argued that a one-size-fits-all approach is more likely to produce mediocrity as the standards become a ceiling instead of a floor. There are now fifteen states that have dropped out of or scaled back their involvement in the CCS aligned assessment consortia. Last week, former Governor Mike Huckabee acknowledged that he has abandoned his support of the standards because of the high level of involvement by the federal government. To view his monologue, click here.

International Testing Results Reveal American Stagnation
The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a test administered every three years to 15-year-old students in math, science and reading. Recently released scores reveal that educational achievement in America has remained stagnant. Out of the 65 participating educational systems and countries, American students were ranked 30th in math, 23rd in science, and 20th in reading. As National Center for Education Statistics Commissioner Jack Buckley noted while American students’ scores have remained relatively the same other nations have made significant gains over time. The education systems of three states—Connecticut, Florida, and Massachusetts—participate in PISA individually. Massachusetts, which ranks first among US states, beat the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average in all three subjects. Although Shanghai, China, ranks first on the assessment, educational experts acknowledge that low achievers are prohibited from attending public schools in China, a policy that naturally produces higher test scores. Furthermore, China has been allowed to submit “cherry-picked results” that do not include all the scores from participating provinces. It is important to note that while PISA results are instructive, education experts caution against making “broad policy prescriptions based on PISA scores.” Furthermore, the latest scores contradict other reports that posited that higher performing countries also had teachers who were in the top of their respective classes. In reality, the latest test revealed that the highest ranked countries employed predominately average ranked graduates and instead focused their improvement efforts on teacher training and retention.
Senate Nuclear Option Paves Way for Controversial Nominees
Following through on his decision to break Senate rules in order to change the rules, Majority Leader Harry Reid filed cloture on the motion to proceed to a number of controversial executive and judicial nominations. For decades, a 60 vote threshold was required to proceed to confirmation votes. This rule protected the power of the minority party to block nominees that they found objectionable or unqualified. In the Bush administration, Senate Republicans contemplated lowering the threshold to a simple majority but this move was roundly denounced by the Democrats as unpatriotic. After several filibuster fights this year, Leader Reid reversed his earlier opposition and changed the rules. Currently, the upper chamber is composed of 53 Democrats, 2 Independents (who caucus with the Democrats), and 45 Republicans, which means that the Democrats can now approve any nominee with the exception of Supreme Court appointees on a party-line vote. On Tuesday, Leader Reid placed ten nominees on the voting calendar, including some who had been previously voted down. The effects of this naked power grab will affect the judiciary for decades to come, especially on the very important D.C. Circuit Court.

Judge Orders Baker to Violate Beliefs
A Colorado judge has ordered a Lakewood baker to bake for same-sex wedding ceremonies or close his business. Jack Phillips, owner of Masterpiece Cakeshop, has maintained that while he will bake cakes for other occasions his Christian beliefs preclude him from providing a cake for a same-sex wedding ceremony. In his administrative law opinion, the judge ruled that local nondiscrimination ordinances require Mr. Phillips to bake cakes for anyone who requests his service. The Colorado Civil Rights Division must now decide whether to adopt this finding. The case will most likely be appealed to a higher court. Focus on the Family Judicial Analyst, Bruce Hausknecht, opined, “Freedom of conscience is an inalienable right of all Americans….It’s based on what the Founders believed was written into the Declaration of Independence and has been put in state constitutions ever since. Forcing this baker to go against his conscience is simply violating the foundations on which the state Constitution and federal Constitution are based.”

House Holds Hearing for Imprisoned Iranian Pastor
On Thursday, a joint subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee held a hearing on behalf of Pastor Saeed Abedini, an Iranian pastor who has been imprisoned for his beliefs. Lawyers from the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) and Pastor Saeed’s wife Naghmeh testified at the hearing. The pastor, who is also an American citizen, has been unjustly imprisoned in inhumane conditions for over a year on the charge that he was seeking to lead people to Christ. Groups like ACLJ have worked to highlight his case. This included an aggressive social media strategy. In September, President Obama mentioned Pastor Saeed’s plight in a call with Iranian President Hasan Rouhani. In spite of the advocacy on his behalf, Pastor Saeed was moved to a more deplorable part of the prison and has experienced declining health. To view the hearing, click here. To find out how to help Pastor Saeed’s family, click here.

In Case You Missed It:
Weekly Market Update provided by Jeff Beach of the AACS Investment Team at Merrill Lynch

More Evidence of Link Between Abortion and Cancer

Former Rep. Ron Paul Supports Hobby Lobby

DOE Mandate Force Bureaucratic Compliance Onto States

Dr. James Dobson Joins Fight Against HHS Mandate