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*“That wise men have in all ages thought government necessary for the good of mankind; and, that wise governments have always thought religion necessary for the well ordering and well-being of society, and accordingly have been ever careful to encourage and protect the ministers of it, paying them the highest public honors, that their doctrines might thereby meet with the greater respect . . . ”*

Benjamin Franklin

**Common Core Controversy Intensifies in Louisiana**

As a new school year begins, the Common Core controversy in Louisiana is proving to be an intense [battle](#) among government officials. On Monday, the president of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) Chas Roemer [announced](#) that the state would continue implementation of the Common Core Standards (CCS), despite Governor Jindal’s announcement just two months ago that he would take steps to pull Louisiana out of the Common Core by suspending the testing contracts for the Common Core assessments. Roemer accused the governor of playing politics and creating a “fiasco” with his opposition to the standards, and the BESE joined a lawsuit against the governor that accused him of violating the Louisiana Constitution in his actions against the Common Core. This week a state judge [ruled](#) that the lawsuit would move forward but that the governor would not have to testify under oath. Several other states are considering legislative action against the Common Core, as outlined in a map created by conservative website [Truth In American Education](#) and posted on their [homepage](#).

**Religious Liberty and the New Tolerance**

A political battle is brewing pitting a new class of “reformers” against religious liberty advocates. Religious liberty, once commonly understood as a basic and important Constitutional civil right, is being recast as a loophole for intolerance. The battle lines can be seen most clearly in the public debates surrounding recent court decisions striking down state marriage laws, the Supreme Court decision in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*, and the President’s Executive Order implementing the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) for federal contractors. Now, even the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), passed only 20 years ago with overwhelming bi-partisan support (the Senate vote was 99-1) and signed by Bill Clinton, is under threat of [repeal](#). The battle has grown more apparent as larger denominations and organizations seek to preserve their religious liberties in the courts and through legislation and to counter increasing governmental demands that violate religious liberty. The recent firestorm of [controversy](#) over Gordon College’s reassertion of traditional marriage and the desire to have its religious liberty respected illustrate [what is at stake](#). Opponents to religious exemptions see attempts to preserve religious liberty as a sort of “[sore loser](#)” syndrome or governmental sanction protecting bigotry. The new cultural reformers see intolerance in religious beliefs that prevent others from expressing their sexuality or prohibit a woman from making so-called health care decisions. Both sides claim the right to live freely. At stake is whether the US will preserve a pluralistic society in which all persons are allowed to live according to the dictates of conscience or a society in which some traditional religious viewpoints are seen as dangerous to the wishes of society and therefore not worthy of tolerance.

## **Florida Teachers Union Sues Over School Choice for Special Needs Students**

Just two short months after Florida's passage of a bill allowing parents of special needs students to apply for state scholarships, the Florida Teachers Association [filed suit](#) claiming that the law violates a Florida constitutional [provision](#) prohibiting bills which combine different subject matters into one law. The bill at issue created [Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts](#) (PLSA) allowing parents to direct the state school funds toward educational options best suited to their children's special needs and expanded an already existing corporate scholarship program. Parents utilizing the scholarships are free to choose among multiple options including schools, therapists, specialists, curriculum, and technology—even a college savings account. The scholarships are modeled after Arizona's Education Savings Accounts (ESA) and provide up to 90 percent of the per pupil amount spent to educate a student in the public system. Based on initial applications for the PLSAs, the program seems to be very popular with parents who see it as a way to provide a better education for their students. The teachers union however disagrees that parents can provide sufficient accountability to direct their own student's education. "We find it ironic that the state wants to move these students with disabilities to unaccountable private providers," [writes](#) Florida Education Association vice president Joanne McCall in the Tampa Tribune. Although the teachers union was primarily concerned with the expansion of the corporate scholarship program, Ron Meyers calls the scholarships for special needs students "[collateral damage](#)" in the suit. If the union is successful in its suit, the program could be reauthorized in Florida's next legislative session.

## **The DOE Office of Non-Public Education Announces the US Senate Youth Program**

[The United States Senate Youth Program](#), established in 1962 by U.S. Senate Resolution, is a unique educational experience for outstanding high school students interested in pursuing careers in public service. The 53<sup>rd</sup> annual program will be held in Washington, D.C., March 7–14, 2015. Once selected, two student leaders from each state, the District of Columbia, and the Department of Defense Education Activity will gather for an intensive week-long study of the federal government and the people who lead it. The overall mission of the program is to help instill knowledge of the American political process and a lifelong commitment to public service. The 2015 program application will be released on Friday, August 22, 2014. Applications are available directly from the program's [state selection contacts](#). Application deadlines vary by state and are listed on the program website.

## **DOE Office of Early Learning Announces New Poll Claiming Bipartisan Support for More Fed Funding**

The Office of Early Learning announced in this week's newsletter a poll conducted by the left leaning First Five Years Fund. The non-profit group's stated purpose is to "make quality early childhood education a national priority through information, advocacy and outreach. [To do this] the First Five Years Fund works with policymakers, experts, business leaders and advocates to advance federal investment in quality early childhood education for disadvantaged children from birth to age five." FFYF is supported by a host of liberal philanthropic organizations including the Buffet Early Childhood Education Fund and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The [poll](#) claims to find that "seven in ten American voters support a proposal that would increase federal investment to help states provide more access to high-quality early childhood programs for low- and moderate-income families."

## **In Case You Missed It:**

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

[Common Core Advocates Push for Curriculum's Use in College Admissions](#)

[The Next "Hobby Lobby": Mandating IVF Coverage](#)

[Tax man cometh? The IRS and church politics](#)

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