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“The civil rights of none shall be abridged on account of religious belief or worship, nor shall any national religion be established, nor shall the full and equal rights of conscience be in any manner, or on any pretext infringed.”

James Madison

AACS State Leaders Sign Religious Freedom Letter to Congressional Leadership

Last week, over 70 educational leaders, including several AACS state leaders and school administrators, sent a [letter](#) to Congressional leadership urging the passage of the Government Non-Discrimination Act. Sponsored by Senator Lee (Utah), the bill would prohibit discrimination by the government against individuals who hold to the belief that marriage is the union of a man and a woman. The letter references the recent remarks made by U.S. Solicitor General Donald Verrilli during the oral arguments for the marriage case before the U.S. Supreme Court in which he openly admitted that redefining marriage will naturally create “an issue” for the tax exempt status of nonprofits and could also threaten the autonomy of religious institutions that provide married student housing. Statistics show that there are approximately [29,000](#) faith-based K-12 schools and about [1,700](#) religious higher education institutions nationwide that likely hold to the belief that marriage is the union between one man and one woman. As the letter points out, “Any federal initiative, whether generated in the judicial, executive, or legislative branches of government, to remove tax-exempt status from faith-based educational institutions because of their commitment to their beliefs about marriage would result in severe financial distress for those institutions and their millions of students. Additionally, it would constitute a devastating and dangerous blow to free religious belief and practice in a nation founded upon such.” AACS President Keith Wiebe joined Senator Lee at a press conference in Washington, D.C., to show the support of the AACS ministries for the Government Non-Discrimination Act and the protection it would provide to the religious liberty of Christian schools. To view Dr. Wiebe’s remarks, click [here](#). To read the letter signed by AACS state leaders and administrators, click [here](#).

Universal School Choice Enacted in Nevada

On Tuesday, Nevada’s Governor Brian Sandoval [signed into law](#) a groundbreaking school choice program that will provide universal school choice in the state of Nevada. The new law establishes a program which allows parents of all school age children who have attended a public school for at least 100 days to use education savings accounts (ESA) to choose the best educational option for their child. Parents will have access to 90%–100% of the funds that normally would have been spent on the child’s education and can spend the money on a variety of [educational expenses](#) including tuition at a public or private school, textbooks, tutoring, school transportation, and fees for distance learning. Additionally, any unused funds will be rolled over each year. Nevada is the 5th state to enact a choice program involving ESA’s, following Arizona, Florida, Mississippi, and Tennessee. However, Nevada’s program is by far the broadest as it allows every child access to the program, and places no cap on the number of students enrolled and the income level of participating families.

House and Senate Poised to Vote on ESEA Reauthorization

The U.S. House of Representatives is poised to vote on reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), possibly as early as next week according to some [policy experts](#). Portions of the bill reduce the number of federal programs, explicitly prohibit the establishment of a national standard and test, and provide protection for the autonomy of private and faith-based schools; yet some conservatives have still expressed opposition to the bill, calling for it to go farther in eliminating the federal role in education. Some pundits expect the bill to be brought to the floor under a rule which will allow Members to vote on three amendments upon passage of the bill, providing an opportunity to include school choice options such as Title 1 portability and also a provision to allow states to opt completely out of the law's requirements. The U.S. Senate is also gearing up for a floor debate on their version of ESEA reauthorization, with the focus of their debate likely centered on accountability measures for the poor-performing schools.

Federal Court Upholds Texas Pro-Life Law

Last Tuesday, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld that a Texas law requiring abortion clinics to meet hospital-level operating standards is indeed constitutional. The new regulations, considered to be some of the toughest in the nation, would essentially force more than half of abortion clinics in Texas to close their doors. Although the contenders of the bill claim that this legislation's sole purpose is to close abortion clinics, supporters of the bill insist that it will protect women's health by raising the standard and quality of care for women seeking abortions. The law is scheduled to take effect in 20 days unless a stay is issued by the Supreme Court. Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton [remarked](#) that the Fifth Circuit's decision was a "victory for life and women's health." He went on to add, "H.B. 2 both protects the unborn and ensures Texas women are not subjected to unsafe and unhealthy conditions. Today's decision by the Fifth Circuit validates that the people of Texas have authority to establish safe, common-sense standards of care necessary to ensure the health of women."

In Case You Missed It:

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

[Alabama Strengthens School Choice Program](#)

[Pew Research Reveals Questions May Direct Poll Outcomes](#)

[Arkansas Poised to Drop Common-Core Test in Favor of ACT](#)

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