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We have no Constitution which functions in the absence of a moral people.
John Adams

White House Considers Expanding School Choice Options

President Trump reiterated his call for expansion of school choice opportunities during his address this week to Congress, calling education "the civil rights issue of our time." He then urged Congress to "pass an education bill that funds school choice for disadvantaged youth, including millions of African-American and Latino children. These families should be free to choose the public, private, charter, magnet, religious or home school that is right for them." He specifically recognized Denisha Merriweather, who benefited from a tax credit school choice program which allowed her to attend a private center for learning after failing third grade twice. She went on to become the first in her family to graduate high school and college and is currently working on a master's degree. The White House is reportedly considering a federal school choice tax credit scholarship program for working class families that would enable parents to send their children to the school of their choice, including private and religious schools. The program would likely be modeled after legislation introduced in 2013 by Sen. Marco Rubio (FL) and Rep. Todd Rokita (IN) called the Educational Opportunities Act. This bill would have created a credit line of up to $4500 for individuals and $100,000 for organizations or corporations that donate to an educational scholarship organizations. Currently, 17 states have enacted tax credit school choice programs, and two more—Kentucky and Texas—are considering tax credit legislation this year. A tax credit scholarship program generally works by giving tax credits to individuals or businesses that make donations to an educational scholarship organization (ESO), which then offers scholarships to families that meet certain criteria determined by the ESO or the state law and can be tailored to meet a specific population and/or type of school. In such a program, participating schools are not direct recipients of government funds, and, therefore, their autonomy and mission remain protected from burdensome regulations that might come with accepting direct government funds, such as often happens through a voucher program. Some critics of President Trump's plan claim that it is a "backdoor voucher" even though government money is not directly assisting private or religious schools. Additionally, some conservatives are offering caution that a federal tax credit program would increase the government's role in education and encourage states to further regulate existing tax credit scholarship programs. Proponents of the president's plan are discussing the possibility of passing such a program through a larger tax cut bill, such as through the budget reconciliation process which only needs 51 Senate votes to pass. A report also surfaced that President Trump plans to expand funding for the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program, the popular and successful choice program that the Obama Administration tried repeatedly to defund. There are currently 1,100 students in the program, which offers scholarship vouchers to low-income families chosen through a lottery system. President Trump is expected to release his budget proposal mid-March, which will give more indication as to the level of funding he would like to put towards these choice programs.

House of Representatives Repeals Education Regulations

The House of Representatives has passed two resolutions to repeal education regulations that were finalized during the last days of the Obama Administration. Lawmakers used the authority of the Congressional Review Act (CRA), a 1996 law which gives Congress 60 legislative days to pass a joint resolution expressing disapproval of the rule. The House passed H.J. Res. 57, introduced by Rep. Todd Rokita (IN), to roll back the regulation which prescribes certain requirements to states for creating accountability measures under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The regulation is contrary to the language in ESSA which specifically limits the role of the Secretary of Education and allows states to develop their own accountability standards. A second resolution, H.J. Res. 58, introduced by Rep. Brett Guthrie (KY), rolls back regulations finalized in October of 2016 which prescribed certain federal requirements for teacher preparation programs. By repealing these regulations, Congress will be limiting the federal role in education. Under the provisions of CRA, a resolution needs to receive only 51 votes in the Senate and then be signed into law by the president.

Judge Blocks Texas from Defunding Planned Parenthood

Last Tuesday, U.S. District Judge Sam Sparks temporarily blocked an effort by the state of Texas to defund Planned Parenthood. In 2015, the effort to defund the organization of Medicaid reimbursements was begun as a result of the revelation that many Planned Parenthood clinics were participating in the practice of selling aborted baby body parts for profit. However, Judge Sparks ruled against the effort, claiming the clinics were needed to help "vulnerable populations." Ken Paxton, Attorney General of Texas, expressed his disappointment in the ruling, saying the decision "flies in the face of basic human decency." He continued, "No taxpayer in Texas should have to subsidize this repugnant and illegal conduct. We should never lose sight of the fact that, as long as abortion is legal in the United States, the potential for these types of horrors will continue." Paxton plans to appeal the order, but the block will remain in place until the case is heard in a higher court. In 2016, a congressional select investigative committee not only filed 15 criminal referrals against Planned Parenthood and other organizations involved in the scandal but also requested that Paxton prosecute a late-term abortionist.

In Case You Missed It:

Weekly Market Update provided by Jeff Beach of the AACS Investment Team at Merrill Lynch

President Trump Speaks to CPAC

White House Hosts Parent Teacher Conference Listening Session

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