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“Fasting and prayer are religious exercises; the enjoining them an act of discipline. Every religious society has a right to determine for itself the time for these exercises, and the objects proper for them, according to their own particular tenets; and right can never be safer than in their hands, where the Constitution has deposited it.”

Thomas Jefferson, 1808

Education and Life Provisions in the Omnibus

This week, Congress passed the Omnibus Appropriations Bill which determined the amount of discretionary funding for the rest of the fiscal year which ends on September 30, 2017. While the funding levels and priorities are receiving mixed reviews, school choice advocates are praising the strong support given to choice opportunities. Funding for the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program was [included](#), a significant victory in light of the fact that the Obama Administration repeatedly tried to defund the successful choice program which has provided options for parents and children in D.C. since 2011. The budget also included an increase in support for charter schools, another sign of the Administration’s strong support for school choice. On Wednesday of this week, President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos joined students at a White House school choice event and celebrated the renewal of the DCOSP. The students were from Cornerstone Schools, a Christian school in Washington, D.C., that serves many students who are recipients of the scholarships provided through the DCOSP. President Trump [remarked](#), “The opportunity scholarship program that we’re funding allows families in the inner city of our nation’s capital to leave failing public schools and attend a private school, making an extraordinary difference in these incredible young lives. . . . The results speak for themselves. Ninety-eight percent of scholarship recipients represent their high school diplomas, and they’re really very, very special. They go into tremendous successes.” Other significant changes to [education funding](#) included a \$550 million increase for Title I which helps low income students, an \$85 million increase for Head Start programs, and a \$294 million decrease for Title II-A which funds professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators. Regarding pro-life provisions, the omnibus retained important pro-life riders such as the Hyde amendment, the DC Hyde (Dornan) amendment, and the Helms amendment, all of which prohibit taxpayer funding of abortion. Additionally, an increase of \$5 million was allotted for sexual risk avoidance education (abstinence education), bringing the total funding available to \$15 million. However, new initiatives such as conscience protections or a complete defunding of Planned Parenthood were not included in the deal, in large part [due to the fact](#) that Senate rules required 60 votes for a bill such as this one. Those provisions are likely to be included in the health care bill which will only need 51 votes to pass the Senate as it will be handled as a reconciliation bill.

President Trump Signs Executive Order to Protect Religious Liberty

On Thursday, the National Day of Prayer, President Trump signed an executive order which directs the executive branch to take steps to ensure religious liberty is protected. Specifically, the order instructs the Attorney General to “issue guidance interpreting religious liberty protections in Federal law,” and instructs the Secretary of the Treasury to alleviate the burden of the Johnson amendment, a law which was passed to stifle

pastors' political speech. Additionally, the executive order protects religious organizations from the onerous Obamacare requirement to provide abortifacients in their healthcare plans regardless of the tenets of their faith. Last February, a draft of a more specific religious liberty executive order was leaked, and 51 Republicans in the House of Representatives recently sent a [letter](#) to President Trump urging him to sign that executive order. A similar letter was sent by 18 Senators early in April. The letter recognized the need for legislation such as the First Amendment Defense Act to ensure permanent religious liberty protection, but emphasized the executive order is needed to immediately reverse burdensome Obama-era policies.

**This article was updated 5/8/17.*

Missouri Senate Passes ESA bill

Last Thursday, the Missouri State Senate [passed a measure](#) which will create a tax-credit funded education savings account program and simplify the process for students seeking to transfer out of failing public schools. The savings account program allows people to receive a tax credit for a donation to a fund which provides financial aid to parents of students with disabilities, foster parents, and parents in the military. The parents can use the aid for any educational related expense including home schooling or private schools. The fund is capped at \$25 million, and students are only qualified for the program if they have been enrolled in a public school for at least one semester. The bill also removes an old provision in a law that requires unaccredited struggling districts to pay for students to change schools. The new provision allows single schools to become unaccredited and requires students to transfer schools within their own district. If the public schools are full, the student may enroll in a nearby private or charter school. The bill passed the senate by a 20-12 vote and now moves to the house for further debate.

In Case You Missed It:

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

[Trump to Stick With Conservative List for Next Supreme Court Pick](#)

[A Pastor's Perspective on how School Choice is Lifting Up Florida's Most Disadvantaged Students](#)

[FRC Webcast - "Free to Believe: Religious Liberty in the Land of the Free"](#)

[National Day of Prayer](#)

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