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"The struggle of today, is not altogether for today—it is for a vast future also. With a reliance on Providence, all the more firm and earnest, let us proceed in the great task which events have devolved upon us."
Abraham Lincoln

ONPE Hosts Annual Conference for Private School Leaders

Last week, the AACCS Washington staff attended the National Private School Leadership Conference hosted by the [Office of Non-Public Education \(ONPE\)](#) in the U.S. Department of Education (ED). The virtual conference began with comments by ONPE Director Maureen Dowling, in which she discussed the move of the ONPE to the Department of Health and Human Services as part of an [interagency agreement](#) between ED and HHS as the administration seeks to downsize the scope of the Department of Education. Dowling explained that the Office of Administration for Children and Families in HHS would support the continued work of the ONPE to carry out its mission, which is to "maximize the participation of private school students and teachers in federal education programs and initiatives." Following Dowling's remarks, Secretary of Education Linda McMahon thanked the participants for their work in education and assured them of the administration's commitment to supporting school choice and providing educational freedom for parents to choose the best educational method for their families.

School choice was also highlighted during a panel discussion on the new [Educational Freedom Tax Credit \(EFTC\)](#), which was created through the passage of the Working Families Tax Cut Act. The EFTC allows for a \$1,700 dollar-for-dollar federal tax credit for donations made to scholarship-granting organizations that then distribute scholarships to families to use for educational purposes. Governors must choose to opt in to the program in order for families in their state to participate. The panel discussion was led by Lindsey Burke, deputy chief of staff at ED and long-time school choice advocate. Panelists included Brian Broderick with the Michigan Association of Nonpublic Schools, Laura Colangelo with the Texas Private School Association, Thomas Odom with the Florida Association of Academic Nonpublic Schools, and Tara Rolle with the California Association of Private Schools. While Texas and Florida have robust school choice programs already in place and are part of the [31 states](#) that have indicated participation in the EFTC, Michigan and California governors have been resistant to school choice. Odom and Rolle discussed their efforts to persuade state leadership to opt in to the EFTC program and also to prepare their schools for participation if that happens.

The conference also included a special session featuring Phil Rosenthal, from ED's Office of the General Counsel, who provided a thorough explanation of the recent memo released by the Department of Justice regarding [federal protections for religious liberty](#). Another session explained the ESEA waiver program and how it helps return power over education to the state level. To date, six states have requested and received waivers. A final session included an update on the emergency management and recovery resources available for private schools through the Department of Education.

AACS Signs On to Amicus Brief to Overturn *Locke*

The AACS has joined an [amicus brief](#) in *Hall v. Fleming*, a case with significant implications for religious liberty. The case was filed by Bethany Hall, a student at Liberty University. She qualified for the Virginia Tuition Assistance Grant, a \$5,000 grant for Virginia residents studying at accredited private nonprofit colleges. However, the state denied Hall the grant when she switched her major from music education to a vocational degree in youth ministries, and then later to music and worship. Both a federal district court and the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled against Hall. She has now petitioned the Supreme Court to hear her case and overturn [Locke v. Davey](#). In *Locke*, the Supreme Court set a precedent that allows states to block funding to students studying degrees in vocational ministry. The brief that the AACS joined included two reasons why the court should take the case and overturn *Locke*. First, the court's reliance on the [antiestablishment clause](#) in *Locke* lacks historical support. Although many Founders opposed funding direct and compulsory religious aid, clergy could still benefit indirectly from public funds based on their voluntary choices. Second *Locke*'s religious-degree rationale creates First Amendment concerns, like government entanglement with religion. "Would a teaching degree program pose concerns if its childhood development or pedagogical approaches were rooted in religious principles?" the [brief](#) asked. "What if an individual planned to use a teaching degree to further an education-focused ministry at a religious private school or nonprofit?" The Supreme Court may decide as early as mid-October if it will take the case.

American Student Reading Scores Drop

Recent results from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows that 15-year-old students in the United States dropped 14 points in reading proficiency from 2022 to 2025. Students in the United States [scored](#) an average of 504 on the PISA in 2022 but only 490 in 2025. The PISA also ranks average scores across 23 countries. Although the United States's PISA score was above the average of all participating countries at 466, students in countries like Canada, China, and Singapore performed better. PISA results showed that gap between the top and bottom performing United States students has widened. The PISA also measures how well 15-year-old students score in science and mathematics. United States students made slight gains in science, from 499 in 2022 to 502 in 2025. However, mathematics scores have dropped, falling two points from 2022 to 2025. Researchers found that the 2025 PISA scores were the lowest average of all participating countries in science, reading, and mathematics. U.S. Education Secretary Linda McMahon [said](#) that the scores "confirm a decade of stagnation and a devastating gap. . . . This moment is a stress test for our nation's future. To pass it, we must enact a hard reset that stops protecting a failed status quo."

In Case You Missed It:

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

[Practical Legal Help for Christian Schools: ADF Ministry Alliance](#)

[The Trump Administration Advances the Establishment of America's First Nationwide School Choice Program](#)

[Virginia's Abortion Proposal: Extreme in the Extreme](#)

[The Heritage Foundation Education Freedom Report Card](#)

[Most American Churchgoers Say Their Clergy Address Political Issues, Poll Finds](#)

[The Best Accountability Tool in Education Is Giving Parents a Choice](#)

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