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“Political freedom includes in it every other blessing. All the pleasures of riches, science, virtue, and even religion itself derive their value from liberty alone.”

Benjamin Rush

South Carolina Expands School Choice with SAFE Grants

Recognizing that COVID-19 has affected every family in South Carolina, regardless of where they send their children to school, Governor Henry McMaster announced his allocation of \$32 million from the Governor’s Emergency Education Relief (GEER) discretionary fund to a school choice initiative, [Safe Access to Flexible Education \(SAFE\) Grants](#). He announced this new program in a live broadcast on Monday from the auditorium of Hampton Park Christian School in Greenville, SC. SAFE grants will provide low- to middle-income families with private school tuition assistance through one-time scholarships of up to \$6,500 per student. Approximately 5,000 scholarships will be available—the first 2,500 on a first-come, first-served basis, and the 2,500 others awarded by lottery. Eligible families (with a household income up to 300% of the federal poverty level, or \$78,600 for a family of four) can apply for these scholarships online. Coupled with the Supreme Court’s recent decision (in *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue*) that a family cannot be disqualified from a school choice program because they choose a religious school, the SAFE Grant program is very good news for South Carolinians whose current financial challenges prevent them from sending their children back to their Christian school. While the program is temporary, this bold step may provide the impetus for future legislation expanding access to school choice in South Carolina, where currently, tax credit scholarships are available only to students with special needs.

Gov. McMaster had previously announced that the South Carolina Department of Education will be approving school districts’ reopening plans only if they give families the option to choose between sending their children back in person 5 days per week or enrolling in completely virtual learning. However, public school educators across the state have fought back, and some districts, [backed by](#) Superintendent Molly Spearman, have rejected this requirement, leaving families scrambling to find educational options that work better for their children. Dissatisfaction with their school’s reopening plan has families across the United States, especially ones with children with special needs, [considering alternatives](#) such as virtual schools, homeschooling, private tutoring, or starting a co-op. However, these options are available only to families who can afford to incur educational expenses. For families in South Carolina, SAFE Grants will provide flexibility for these families. Edward Earwood, executive director of South Carolina Association of Christian Schools, praised the program, noting that “Gov. McMaster demonstrated courage and vision when he established these SAFE Grants, expanding educational options for parents during a time of uncertainty.” He added, “SAFE Grants empower parents to choose the best education option available for their children; for many, this is a watershed moment.” Unfortunately, on June 22, Orangeburg County Circuit Court Judge Edgar Dickson [temporarily blocked](#) the program after a public school teacher sued Gov. McMaster for his decision to allocate his discretionary funds to the SAFE Grant program. *By Alison Heape, AACCS Summer Intern*

DeVos Offers New School Choice for Native Americans

U.S. Secretary of Education [announced](#) last Friday a new grant program aimed at providing school choice for Native American students. The program will make \$15 million available through the Accessing Choices in Education (ACE) grants for Native American tribes or a grantee (such as the state or local educational agency) that works to provide educational options for students in a tribe. Secretary DeVos has repeatedly stated that the coronavirus has given educators an opportunity to rethink and transform their approach to education in order to ensure that learning continues for students. In a statement regarding this new grant program, she reiterated that point and noted this new opportunity to help Native Americans: “This pandemic has made very clear that education needs to be more adaptable and student-centered. Tragically, too many Native American students lack access to a high-quality education option that meets their unique needs. The ACE grant program helps to accomplish this for Native American families.” She then pointed out that the ACE program helps these families by “empowering tribes to select the range of resources to offer students” and also by empowering parents “to select the resources that are the right fit for them.” Applications for the grants must demonstrate that more than one education option will be offered to the students, and these can include tutoring, summer school or afterschool educational programs, private school tuition, apprenticeship training, supplemental services for special education, and educational technology among many other options listed. The ACE program is another indication of the commitment by the Trump administration to advance school choice as the means for reforming education across the country.

Churches Sue California Governor Over “Worship Ban”

Three California churches have [sued](#) California Gov. Gavin Newsom following his [July 1st executive order](#) which stated, “Places of worship must therefore discontinue indoor singing and chanting activities.” The [complaint](#) calls attention to the governor’s hypocrisy in his “Worship Ban” that specifically targets church services as the governor did not call for any other social places to be subject to the ban. Governor Newsom has previously encouraged large groups of protestors, stating on [Twitter](#), “Protesters have the right to protest peacefully—not be harassed,” and also in a [press conference](#), “For those of you out there protesting, I want you to know that you matter. To those who want to express themselves . . . God bless you. Keep doing it.” The complaint points out that while the governor said protestors “have a right to free speech” and should “do what’s best,” churches that violate his executive order are in danger of facing “fine[s], imprisonment, or both.” The lawsuit charges that the governor’s ban violates the churches’ “Constitutional rights under the [First](#) and [Fourteenth Amendments](#) to the United States Constitution.” Last week, the governor also instituted a ban on in-person services in some areas, prompting pushback from many area pastors. Pastor Don Komush of Upper Room Church stated, “Enough is enough. We believe as Christians that we are being attacked.” Earlier this year in March, Governor Newsom faced another lawsuit from churches when he banned in-person services for the entire state. He eventually withdrew that ban after a group of over 3,000 churches sent a letter stating they were reopening their doors, regardless of whether he lifted the ban or not, and U.S. Attorney General Barr warned the governor his ban placed an unfair burden on religion. *By Ariana Rubbet, AACS Summer Intern*

In Case You Missed It:

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

[AACS Resource Page to Help Christian Schools Responding to COVID Crisis](#)

[Ryan Anderson: Religious Liberty is Important, but It is Not Enough](#)

[Why We Must Advocate for Better Civics Education in Our Schools](#)