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“Peace is not the absence of conflict; it is the ability to handle conflict by peaceful means.”
Ronald Reagan

President Trump Signs Measures to Help Private Schools and Families During COVID-19

President Trump recently signed two measures to provide relief to private schools and families seeking educational alternatives during the COVID-19 shutdowns. The first was the latest COVID-19 relief bill, which includes \$2.75 billion in education funding for private schools to use for COVID-related expenses, such as cleaning and disinfecting supplies, improving ventilation and air purification systems, and educational technology to provide distance learning. Funds are available to private schools through the Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEER) grants and will be distributed by the state education agency (SEA) to ensure that Christian schools are not considered direct recipients of federal financial assistance. The GEER funds can cover only “secular, neutral, and non-ideological” expenses and cannot be used to provide school choice vouchers, tax credits, education savings accounts, or scholarships. However, states already using GEER funds to provide school choice options for students (in FL, NH, and OK) can continue to do so. Although the bill also expands the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), schools cannot participate in both of these renewed programs. They may, however, participate in the new GEER funds if they already received PPP loans under the CARES Act. The bill also renews the CARES Act’s universal charitable deduction, allowing non-itemizing taxpayers to deduct up to \$300 for single filers and \$600 for married filers for cash charitable contributions made in 2021. Schools interested in participating in the new GEER funds should begin the application process through their LEA and SEA. For more information, see our white paper on equitable services [here](#).

On December 28, 2020, President Trump signed the [“Executive Order on Expanding Educational Opportunity Through School Choice,”](#) to provide emergency scholarships for low-income students through the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG), an existing program within the Department of Health and Human Services created to combat poverty by helping families find employment, health services, housing, and education. In the CARES Act passed in March, Congress added an extra \$1 billion to the CSBG, increasing its budget to \$1.7 billion. President Trump’s executive order allows HHS Secretary Alex Azar to also make these grants available for emergency scholarships that low-income families can use to cover education expenses including private school tuition and fees, homeschooling, learning pods, special education, therapies, and tutoring. Although federally funded, the grants will be distributed to families through local governments and Community Action Agencies (CAAs), ensuring that Christian schools accepting students with these grants would not be considered recipients of federal financial assistance. Low-income families can apply for the grants through their CAA, found through this website [here](#). They can also reach out to their state CSBG official and program contact [here](#). A future Biden administration would likely rescind the order, making this a limited opportunity for low-income families to help their children attain a quality, in-person education.

EDITORIAL NOTE: The Washington Office staff thank all our friends who contacted us regarding our safety during Wednesday’s events at the Capitol and surrounding area. We are happy to say that we are all safe and sound and have returned to our work after being evacuated for what was reported to be some form of pipe bomb

found close to our building. It is our privilege to continue the important work of educating and informing policy makers about the issues surrounding Christian education and advocating for religious liberty and our Constitutional principles. Thank you, our readers, for your continuing support. We rest in God's providence and pray for His plan and purposes to be done as we follow Him.

6th Circuit Court of Appeals Overturns Lucas County Order Closing Schools

The 6th Circuit Court of Appeals recently issued a [victory](#) for Christian schools in Lucas County, Ohio, that were ordered to close all in-person classes for grades 7-12. The lawsuit began on December 7, when a group of Christian schools sued the Toledo-Lucas Health Department over its order to close all in-person education while simultaneously allowing various secular businesses and meeting places to remain open. The [court found](#) that the order constituted unequal treatment that violated the Free Exercise Clause. Although the order allowed for "religious educational classes or religious ceremonies," the court found that the schools' "exercise of their faith is not so neatly compartmentalized. . . . Their faith pervades each day of in-person schooling." The court relied upon the Supreme Court's recent decision in *Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn v. Cuomo*, that ruled against the governor's order that unfairly limited church attendance in New York City. Interestingly, the 6th Circuit is the same court that recently ruled against Danville Christian Academy in Kentucky when that school argued that a mandate to close all public and private school violated its Free Exercise rights. However, the court's decision in this case examines the broader questions proposed by Ohio Christian schools contending that the proper comparison to Christian schools is not public schools, but any other "comparable secular actors."

Religious Liberty Win for Churches in New York

The 2nd Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in [favor of religious liberty](#) in a case involving the Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn, the Orthodox Jewish group Agudath Israel of America, and two synagogues that challenged the COVID-related restrictions on religious gatherings in New York. In October, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo issued a mandate which capped attendance at "houses of worship" at the lesser of 25% capacity or 10 people for high risk "red" zones, and 33% or 25 people in lower risk "orange" zones, regardless of the size of the meeting place. The religious groups filed suit, charging the mandate violated their First Amendment rights to freely exercise their religion. In a unanimous 3-0 decision, the court ruled that policy caused "irreparable harm." Judge Michael Park [stated](#), "No public interest is served by maintaining an unconstitutional policy when constitutional alternatives are available to achieve the same goal." The governor dismissed the ruling because the scope of COVID restrictions frequently changes; however, Avi Schick, attorney for Agudath Israel, noted that this decision "will be felt way beyond the COVID context. It is a clear statement . . . that government can't disfavor religious conduct merely because it sees no value in religious practice." Becket Law noted through a tweet, "Gov. Cuomo should read the writing on the wall and let New York join the 33 states that do not cap or put percentage limits on in-person worship."

In Case You Missed It:

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

[March for Life – January 29, 2021](#)

[National School Choice Week Begins January 25, 2021](#)

[Judge Slams Supreme Court's Pro-Abortion Rulings: "Each Human Being is Priceless Beyond All Measure"](#)

[Education in a Time of Pandemic: Not Making the Grade](#)