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“Education means emancipation. It means light and liberty. It means the uplifting of the soul of man into the glorious light of truth, the light by which men can only be made free.”
Frederick Douglass

Two States Pass Broad School Choice Programs During National School Choice Week

National School Choice Week (NSCW) was celebrated last week with thousands of activities and events celebrating the benefits that school choice programs bring to students and families. During NSCW, two states, Iowa and Utah, passed school choice programs which will dramatically expand the educational options available in each state. Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds [signed](#) into law the Students First Act, an education savings account (ESA) program that will give families the [freedom](#) to use up to \$7,598 in state education dollars toward the education of their choice, including private school tuition, tutoring, vocational programs, and standardized testing. Starting in the 2023–24 school year, all Iowa students entering kindergarten along with all public school students will have access to the funding. Private school students whose families make below 300% of the poverty level will also have access to the program. Over time, eligibility for private school families will expand so that by the 2025–26 school year, all private school students will qualify regardless of income level. The state predicts that by 2027, over 41,000 students will use the ESA to attend private schools. The signing of the bill came after intense debate in the Iowa senate, with opponents arguing that private schools do not welcome all children and will siphon education funding away from public schools. Proponents of the bill argued that the new school choice program will provide much needed support for parents who know what is best for their children. Governor Reynolds praised the passage of the bill after years of work to get school choice programs established in Iowa, efforts that were often sidetracked by Democrat and some Republican legislators. With recent elections bringing in an even larger Republican majority in the state legislature, Reynolds was finally able to secure the votes necessary to pass school choice. She [stated](#) in response to the bill’s passage, she [recognized](#) that “for most families [public schools] will continue to be the option of choice, but they aren’t the only choice. For some families, a different path may be better for their children. With this bill, every child in Iowa, regardless of zip code or income, will have access to the school best suited for them.”

The state of Utah also established a universal school choice program when Governor Spencer Cox signed into law HB 215, the Funding for Teacher Salaries and Optional Education Act. In addition to providing a pay raise for public school teachers, the bill creates the [Utah Fits All Scholarship Program](#), an education savings account program available to every student in the state. The program will provide \$8,000 scholarships per child per year that can be used for tuition, tutoring, curriculum, and educational therapies. The program is scheduled to begin for the 2024–25 school year and will be capped at \$42 million and 5,000 students the first year with low-income families given preference in the application process. Corey DeAnglis of the American Federation for Children praised the work of Utah and Iowa to establish education freedom, [stating](#), “A universal school choice revolution has been ignited.” He further quipped that “red states are now engaging in friendly competition to fund students, not systems,” and noted that more states are likely to pass school choice legislation this year. A [growing list](#) of states are indeed prioritizing expanding education freedom to their students and giving parents the choice of attaining the education that best fits their children’s needs.

Arkansas Governor Bans Teaching of CRT in Public Schools

On January 10, newly elected [Arkansas Governor](#), Sarah Huckabee Sanders, signed an executive order banning the teaching of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in K5–12 grade schools. The CRT ban instructs the state’s Department of Education secretary to review educational guidelines, regulations, and policies that could “indoctrinate students with ideologies, such as CRT, that conflict with the principle of equal protection under law or encourage students to discriminate against someone based on characteristics protected by federal or state law.” The order further instructs the secretary to change or remove any materials or rules that are found to be advancing or supporting CRT and, thus, in violation of the executive order. In her [inaugural address](#), Governor Sanders said that schools need to “get back to teaching, reading, writing, math, and science. . . . The identity that truly matters is the one we all share, an identity as children of God and citizens of the United States of America.” [The order](#) supports Governor Sanders’ objective by stating in its opening sentences that “Schools must educate, not indoctrinate students. . . . Teachers and school administrators should teach students how to think—not what to think.” This order is the first of [many steps](#) that Governor Sanders plans to take to improve the school system in Arkansas, including raising teacher salaries and expanding school choice opportunities. Arkansas is the [most recent state](#) to ban CRT from being taught in schools, joining FL, ID, IA, NH, OK, TN, while 16 additional state legislatures have crafted bills to ban CRT.

Jack Phillips Loses Court Case but Continues Religious Liberty Fight

A Colorado state appeals court [has ruled](#) that cake baker Jack Phillips violated the state’s nondiscrimination ordinance when he declined to make a cake designed to celebrate a man transitioning to woman. Autumn Scardina, a biological man who identifies as a woman, filed a lawsuit against Phillips after he declined to make a pink cake with blue frosting that would celebrate Scardina’s purported gender transitioning. The three-judge panel ruled that since the requested cake design did not include symbols or words, Phillips’s refusal to make the cake was a discrimination against the gender status of Scardina. However, Alliance Defending Freedom counsel Jake Warner disagreed, pointing out that “in context, this cake clearly expresses a message.” He added, “The only question then is: ‘Can the government force people like Jack—artists—to express messages that they disagree with.’ ” Phillips plans to appeal the ruling, although he and his attorneys are hoping that the upcoming ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court on a [case](#) involving a wedding website designer will provide the necessary protections for religious liberty. [This case](#) involves Lorie Smith who sued the state of Colorado over its nondiscrimination law in order to preserve her religious liberty to create websites for traditional marriages according to her religious beliefs. Phillips previously won a case at the U.S. Supreme Court in 2018 over a cake celebrating a same-sex union, and he is determined to fight this case as well in order to protect religious liberty. “If they can come after me, they can come after anybody. If we lose these freedoms, it’s not just me. These freedoms are for everybody.”

In Case You Missed It:

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

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

[Promise to America’s Children](#)

[Christian Hope in 2023](#)