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*“Freedom can exist only in the society of knowledge. Without learning, men are incapable of knowing their rights, and where learning is confined to a few people, liberty can be neither equal nor universal.”*  
**Benjamin Rush**

**Math and Reading Scores for 13-Year-Olds Declining**

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has released a report which shows alarming scores for 13-year-olds in the areas of math and reading. The [data shows](#) a four point decline in reading skills and a nine point decline in math skills since 2020. Education officials and several lawmakers are pointing to the school closures during the pandemic as the cause for the academic loss. However, NAEP officials are pointing to data which shows that the academic scores for 13-year-olds have been declining since 2012. National Center for Education Statistics Commissioner Peggy Carr explained that recovery is “going to take some time” and the goal now should not just be “simply going back to the level of achievement we saw before the pandemic.” Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona, however, charges the pandemic caused the drop in student achievement. “The latest data from the NAEP is further evidence of what the Biden-Harris administration recognized from Day One: that the pandemic would have a devastating impact on students’ learning across the country,” Cardona [stated](#) in a press release. According to the press release, public schools have spent almost 60% of their American Rescue Plan funds to support academic recovery by hiring more teachers and counselors and for providing learning programs after school and in the summer. But other leaders have a different solution to the decline in math and reading skills. “Parents should have the power to place their child in a school which is most likely to address the child’s educational need,” [said](#) Sen. Bill Cassidy (LA), the top Republican on the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee. “These scores make the case for school choice better than any other argument.”

The NAEP report is the [latest of several](#) within the last year revealing the negative impact the pandemic school closures had on student learning. Previous reports from NAEP have revealed significant learning loss for 9-year-olds in math and literacy ([September 2022](#)), for fourth and eighth graders in math and reading ([October 2022](#)), and for eighth graders in civics ([May 2023](#)). Reports also show that students have a higher rate of mental distress and are not as physically active as they were before the pandemic. In response to these reports, the House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education held a [hearing](#) in March on learning loss related to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the hearing, Ms. Virginia Gentles, Director of the Education Freedom Center at the Independent Women’s Forum, [pointed to Virginia](#) as an example of the of the severe decline of student academic achievement: “Statewide testing in 2021 revealed an ‘alarming’ 20-year low in early reading skills with 34.5% of K-12 students at high risk for persistent reading difficulties.” Lawmakers and witnesses at the hearing [blamed](#) the school closures, teachers unions, and the underfunding of public schools for the historical academic loss. “The mass shuttering of schools throughout the pandemic is one of our greatest education policy failures in our nation’s history,” [said](#) Rep. Aaron Bean (FL), the subcommittee’s chair. Lawmakers and panelists called for federal health officials and teachers unions to be held accountable for keeping schools closed longer than necessary. [Solutions](#) to combat this academic loss were also discussed, including additional funding for public schools, expanding tutoring and summer education opportunities, and increasing school choice opportunities. AACCS summer intern Sarah Butler contributed to this article.

## Ohio Special August 8 Election Could Determine the Future of Parental Rights

On Tuesday, August 8, voters in Ohio will consider a resolution to increase the voter threshold that is needed to amend the Ohio state constitution, an issue that could have far-reaching effects for parental rights this November. The ballot initiative, [Ohio Issue 1](#), will “increase the voter approval threshold for new constitutional amendments to 60%.” Currently, only a simple majority is needed to amend the Ohio constitution. Opponents of the resolution argue it will hurt direct democracy, while [proponents](#) say the Ohio constitution is currently too easy to change. The Ohio constitution has been amended 172 times and is already nine times the length of the U.S. Constitution (which has only been amended 27 times in 234 years). If passed, Issue 1 could have a significant effect in hindering the attempts to enshrine abortion as a state right as the state will vote on another [amendment](#) in November that would make abortion up to birth a right in Ohio. The language in the proposed amendment does not differentiate between adults and minors, presenting a serious [threat to parental rights](#) as minors could obtain an abortion without parental notice or consent. The vague language of the amendment could also be interpreted to allow minors to have sex change surgeries without parental consent. “Once we’re talking about codifying something into the state constitution,” [said](#) Protect Women Ohio Press Secretary Amy Natoce, “we are ending debate on it” and “making the government a co-parent in this situation.” The [special election on August 8](#), however, could have a significant effect for Ohioans in protecting parental rights and life in November and beyond.

## Texas Judge Refuses to Marry LGBT Couples

A Texas Justice of the Peace is citing the recent Supreme Court ruling in [303 Creative v. Elenis](#) as a defense of her decision to refuse to marry LGBT couples. In 2019, Judge Dianne Hensley was given a public warning by the Texas State Commission on Judicial Conduct (CJC) because she [refused](#) to perform LGBT weddings based on her religious convictions. When asked to perform a marriage ceremony for a same-sex couple, Hensley would decline and make a referral to other local officiants. She never received any complaints from any individuals or couples; however, CJC initiated its own investigation upon becoming aware of her policy. After she received the public warning, First Liberty Institute [filed a lawsuit](#) on her behalf, claiming that she is entitled to a religious exemption and the CJC’s decision violates the Texas Religious Freedom Restoration Act. After the Supreme Court’s June ruling in [303 Creative v. Elenis](#), Dianne Hensley cited the decision in her appeal that is currently pending before the Texas Supreme Court. The [303 Creative](#) case involved a Christian web designer who refused to create websites for same-sex weddings. The Supreme Court ruled that the public accommodations law does not have the power to force web designers to speak in a way that conflicts with their religious views on marriage. The lawyer representing Judge Hensley noted that [303 Creative](#) was based on the web designer’s personal First Amendment rights rather than a religious freedom law, but the lawyer also [noted](#) that the case is relatable because it “rejects the idea of a ‘compelling interest’ in forcing wedding vendors to participate in same-sex and opposite-sex marriage ceremonies on equal terms.” *AACS summer intern Sarah Butler contributed to this article.*

## 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](#)

[Promise to America’s Children](#)

[Poll Shows Support for School Choice has Soared, Crossed Demographics](#)

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