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*“Spiritual freedom is the root of political liberty . . . . As the union between spiritual freedom and political liberty seems nearly inseparable, it is our duty to defend both.”*  
*Thomas Paine*

**AACS Hosts National Legislative Conference**

Last week, AACS state leaders, school administrators, and pastors from across the country gathered in Washington, D.C., for the annual AACS National Legislative Conference, designed to provide a time of spiritual encouragement, legislative updates, and congressional visits. During two special services, Richard Callahan challenged attendees not only to stand firm for the cause of righteousness and freedom but also to bow in humility before the Lord for wisdom and strength. The conference included a briefing presented by the Heritage Foundation which provided updates on the issues facing education, including the problems with gender ideology and Critical Race Theory, the Biden administration’s attempt to forgive student loans, and the importance of school choice. Speakers included Heritage president Dr. Kevin Roberts, Dr. Jay Richards, Dr. Lindsey Burke, and Mike Gonzalez. A congressional briefing in the historic Kennedy Caucus room featured comments from Senators Marsha Blackburn (TN), James Lankford (OK), and Tommy Tuberville (AL), and Representatives Burgess Owens (UT) and Bob Good (VA), all of whom spoke of their efforts and commitment to protect religious liberty and promote school choice. A special part of the congressional briefing was the opportunity to pray for each of these leaders as we are instructed in 1 Timothy 2. During a special banquet on Tuesday evening, AACS honored Kristen Waggoner, the president of Alliance Defending Freedom, with the AACS American Freedom Award for her tireless work to protect religious freedom in the courts. The West Virginia Christian Education Association also presented her with a commemorative vase as a token of gratitude for the help of ADF in protecting the HOPE Scholarship Program, which offers school choice for West Virginia families. Following the banquet, several attendees had the opportunity to enjoy an after-hours tour of the U.S. Capitol hosted by Rep. Barry Loudermilk (GA).

An important part of the conference was the legislative briefing, presented by AACS Government Relations Director Jamison Coppola to provide AACS members with information regarding legislation affecting member ministries so they can effectively communicate to their representatives. This year, the focus was on supporting strong school choice legislation and protecting children from the harmful practices of gender ideology. Regarding school choice, two bills were highlighted which would offer school choice, protect federalism, and protect the autonomy and mission of private schools. The [Educational Choice for Children Act](#) would create a federal tax credit scholarship program, and the [Education Savings Accounts for Military Families Act](#) would provide school choice for military personnel. Regarding the protection of children, the legislative briefing highlighted three bills, all of which prohibit harmful medical procedures which claim to alter a person’s gender: the [Protecting Children from Experimentation Act](#), the [Protect Children’s Innocence Act](#), and the [Protection of Women and Girls in Sports Act](#). The final day of the conference provided time for the attendees to visit the offices of their representatives and senators and advocate on behalf of the families in their ministries on these issues. The AACS is grateful for the many AACS members who participated in the conference, and we praise the Lord for his blessings on the conference and on Christian education.

## **Office of Non-public Education Hosts Conference for Private School Leaders**

Last week, the AACS 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. The sessions during the one-day summit reflected the ONPE mission which is to “foster maximum participation of nonpublic school students and teachers in federal education programs and initiatives.” The conference began with a presentation by Dr. Michael Thompson on strategies for working with parents, and then several government agencies presented opportunities for participation of private schools and their students. Some of the programs presented included STEM initiatives in the Department of Education and the [Poetry Out Loud](#) and music and theater programs in the National Endowment of the Arts. An update from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) highlighted the recently published [goals and objectives](#) of NCES, including the goal “to embed the principles of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in all aspects of the Center’s work.” One session offered a briefing on the recently released [ESEA Title VII Equitable Services Guidance](#), which [provides clarity](#) on the services available to private school students through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). In addition to the presentations, the conference also allowed attendees to network and collaborate to advance opportunities for private schools.

## **Court Rules in Favor of Faith-Based Student Groups**

The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals recently ruled in favor of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), a public-school student athletic club organization. FCA clubs had been operating for over ten years in San Jose, California, before district officials revoked the club’s recognition in 2019. The officials claimed FCA was discriminatory because FCA required its leaders to affirm the club’s religious beliefs, even though any student was invited to attend meetings. Officials eventually shut down all FCA clubs in the district. FCA won first at the district court and then at the appellate court. However, school officials appealed the case again before an *en blanc* court of 11 federal appellate judges from the Ninth Circuit. The 9-2 decision was a resounding victory for FCA and for religious liberty. The judges affirmed clubs can require their leaders to uphold and live out the club’s core beliefs. Moreover, the judges pointed to the district’s [religious discrimination](#) of recognizing secular clubs but not religious ones. In fact, the school district had approved a Satanic Temple Club even while denying FCA’s request to reorganize on campus. “This is a huge win for these brave kids, who persevered through adversity and never took their eye off the ball: equal access with integrity,” [said](#) Daniel Blomberg. Blomberg is the vice president and senior counsel at Becket, the organization that represented FCA. “Today’s ruling ensures religious students are again treated fairly in San Jose and throughout California.”

## **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](#)

[Cal Thomas: Opening Doors to Success](#)