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"We maintain therefore that in matters of Religion, no man's right is abridged by the institution of Civil Society, and that Religion is wholly exempt from its cognizance."
James Madison

Religious Liberty Back in Federal School Choice Bill

This week, a significant victory was reached in the negotiations for school choice in the reconciliation bill. As [AACCS reported last week](#), the Educational Choice for Children Act (ECCA) was added to the ["One, Big Beautiful" reconciliation bill](#) that passed the House Ways and Means Committee. [ECCA](#) is a bill establishing a federal tax credit scholarship program that will advance school choice in every state. A key component of the bill was language that protected the religious liberty of participating schools, ensuring that Christian schools, SGOs, and parents would be protected in the choice program. However, when the bill was incorporated into the larger reconciliation bill, the religious liberty language was stripped out, prompting action from an ad hoc coalition of religious educational organizations that organized quickly to communicate with members of Congress on the importance of maintaining this protective language. Mr. Jamison Coppola, director of the AACCS Washington Office, had multiple meetings and conversations with Speaker Johnson's staff, congressional offices, committee staffers, the White House, and multiple conservative organizations about the importance of ensuring that the autonomy and mission of faith-based schools be protected in the school choice program. Faith-motivated schools make up approximately 75% of all private schools in the nation, and participation of these schools is essential to the success of a school choice program. However, without assurance that their religious liberty is protected, many religious schools will not participate, limiting the program's success. As this important message was communicated to congressional offices, particularly those in congressional leadership positions, Speaker of the House Mike Johnson chose to add the religious liberty language back into the bill before a vote by the full House. This is a significant victory for school choice in the bill. "We're deeply grateful that Speaker Johnson recognizes the importance of protecting religious liberty and for his action returning these protections to the federal school choice program," stated Mr. Coppola. "We believe ECCA will be good for students and families across the country, and an essential part of the success of this program will be protecting the religious liberty of Christian schools, SGOs, and the parents that participate."

The AACCS continues to advocate for maintaining the protective religious liberty language in ECCA as the bill moves through Congress. The AACCS and other religious educational organizations are also advocating for a fix that addresses how private schools provide services for students with disabilities. As the bill currently stands, private schools participating in the school choice program would be required to provide special education services for any student who needs an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). While religious private schools work diligently to meet the needs of all students in their schools, the requirement to establish a system for screening all students and providing IEP services would prevent the vast majority of private schools from being able to participate. The bill passed the full house on Thursday morning by the narrowest of margins 215-214. We invite you to listen to the recent episode of the [AACCS Today podcast](#), in which Mr. Coppola and Mr. Matt Ticzkus discuss the important issue of protecting religious liberty in the federal school choice program.

HHS Guidance Highlights Educational Choice Options and Religious Liberty

The Department of Health and Human Services has [released guidance](#) that highlights ways that educational choice is available through two federally funded programs—the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG). For the TANF funds, a [Dear Colleague letter](#) was issued which states that “a state could use TANF to help fund such services for children and youth, including after-school programs or child care, at educational alternatives to governmental entities, including private and faith-based options.” For the CCDBG, the HHS issued an [Information Memorandum](#) which offers recommendations for ways in which states can expand options for parents using the CCDBG program. Specifically, the memorandum offers suggestions as to how to better engage faith-based providers as options for families using the CCDBG program. The memorandum also emphasizes the religious liberty protections for faith-based providers, stating, “faith-based providers are allowed to use CCDBG funding for sectarian purposes or activities, as long as such activities are provided through a voucher and as long as the provider was freely chosen by the parent.” The guidance further states that religious providers will maintain their freedom to make employment decisions based on their mission and tenets of their beliefs. The guidance does explain that if a religious provider receives a grant directly from the government rather than a voucher or certificate that comes through the parents, some restrictions will apply to those religious providers. However, when the parents direct the CCDBG funds through the vouchers, the religious providers maintain their autonomy and freedom to fully follow their mission. The guidance is in response to the directive in President Trump’s [Executive Order 14191](#) (“Expanding Educational Freedom and Opportunity for Families”) which instructed the HHS Secretary to issue guidance on how states can use these federally funded programs to “expand educational choice and support families who choose educational alternatives to governmental entities, including private and faith-based options.”

Tax Cuts for Families and 529 Expansion in “Big, Beautiful Bill”

The House of Representative’s [“One Big Beautiful” reconciliation bill](#) includes several [pro-family tax policies](#). The bill would extend and expand the tax cuts of the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA). Currently, the child tax credit allows families to receive a maximum of \$2,000 per child under age 17. If passed, the House reconciliation bill would increase the maximum amount to \$2,500 until the end of President Trump’s term in 2028. Even if Congress votes down the increased amount, the bill will make the \$2,000 credit permanent. The credit will drop to \$1,000 per child if Congress fails to extend the TCJA. The House reconciliation bill would also [expand qualifying 529 expenses](#). For instance, families could make tax-free withdrawals for K-12 expenses including curriculum, tutoring, dual-enrollment fees, and educational therapies. Certain approved workforce credentials could qualify as well. In addition, the bill would create [“Trump accounts”](#). Families could invest up to \$5,000 a year for their children in these diversified savings accounts. Other qualifying individuals and nonprofits could also make investments. The government would provide \$1,000 of seed money into the accounts of children born during the second Trump administration. Trump account recipients could use portions of the money at different ages for qualifying expenses, such as college tuition or a home purchase.

In Case You Missed It:

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

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

[Lawmakers from Nearly Every State Tell Congress to Turn Off Federal Tap to Planned Parenthood](#)

[Christian Camp Challenges Policy That Violates Religious Beliefs](#)

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