

Budget Proposal Advances School Choice -- Raising Religious Liberty Questions

As anticipated [the Trump administration budget proposal](#) that was released in late May pared back funding to most domestic programs and included [cuts in federal education funding](#). The proposal would reduce federal education funding by 13.5 percent. This is a reduction of \$9.2 billion from the current \$68.2 billion budget.

These proposed cuts were portrayed dramatically by some liberal lawmakers and advocates as “slashing” public education. This [video clip produced by the Heritage Foundation](#) responds to Representative Rosa DeLauro’s (D-Conn.) characterization of the education proposal as “cruel, inhumane and heartless.” Lindsay Burke of Heritage makes the point that such cuts are necessary to return more control of education to the local and state level.

We should keep two facts in mind about this proposal. First, while a 13 percent cut in the federal education budget seems large, because public schools receive less than 10 percent of their funding from the federal government the actual cuts at the local level would be less than 1.3 percent. Second, the budget cuts will probably not be as large as proposed. As is the case with all presidential budget proposals, the proposal only serves as a starting point for negotiations with Congress that result in a much different final budget.

Proposed Increase for School Choice

The one area of the education proposal receiving a significant increase was Title I funding for students in poverty. However, the \$1 billion increase proposed by the president, instead of being added to the Title I funding formula, would fund school choice grants for low income families.

In this [tense interchange](#) Senator Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) badgered and attempted to push Education Secretary DeVos to say she would go beyond current federal law in deciding whether charter and private schools receiving federal aid can discriminate in enrollment based on religious beliefs, or against gay, lesbian and transgender students. Secretary DeVos stuck to her guns and refused to say that she would use her administrative position to impose and enforce new federal guidelines for admission to private schools. There is currently no federal law prohibiting private schools from making such enrollment determinations and this is also not a requirement of state voucher laws.

The push by the Trump administration for school choice funding begs an important question: *Will private’s schools who accept federal funding – particularly religious private schools – lose some of their independence in making enrollment decisions?* It is often argued that if federal funding is provided to parents in the form of vouchers that they are free to use at the private school of their choice, the federal government is not directly supporting these school. Rather it is the parents providing the support. However, this question could become an issue for the

Supreme Court. The way the Court rules in the next few weeks on the [Trinity Lutheran Church of Columbia, Inc. v. Comer](#) could give some indication regarding how the Court, now with Justice Gorsuch seated, may rule on upcoming religious liberty issues.

Odds and Ends

On the topic of religious discrimination... If you haven't seen this [video of Senator Bernie Sanders \(D - Vt.\)](#) bullying Russell Vought, President Trump's nominee for deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget, you might want to take a quick look at it. Sanders attacks Vought for his writings in support of Wheaton College, a Christian institution, for not allowing Muslim students to attend. Senator Sanders' hostility reminds us that Paul said that those who are perishing would react to the Gospel message as the stench of death:

For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. (2Corinthians 2:15-16)

Mr. Vought did an excellent job defending his faith in a loving yet straight-forward manner. This is something that those working in the public schools may also be called to do. We can take heart that Jesus told us that when such a time comes we will be given the right words:

And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say." (Luke 12:11-12)

Last week the House of Representatives passed House Resolution 390, *The Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability Act*. This important piece of legislation would help Christians, Yazidis and other minorities who have been victims of ISIS genocide. The bipartisan bill coauthored by Rep. Chris Smith (R-N.J.) and Anna Eshoo (D-Ca.) must now pass the Senate. The [Religious Freedom Coalition](#) urges Christians to call their senators at (202) 224-3121 and ask them to vote for a Senate version of HR-390.

Don't forget to pray for the president and other national leaders. Charles Garriott, author of, "Prayers for Trump – Petitions for the 45th President," recommends this [prayer for direction](#) for the President.

CEAI is interested in your thoughts. Members are encouraged to enter comments below. Personal comments may be addressed to the author at JMitchell@ceai.org. John Mitchell is the Washington, DC Area Director for the Christian Educators Association.