

## Education Conflict could Usher in a Golden Age of Education Practice

With gridlock between a Democrat controlled House and Republican Senate, not much education legislation is likely to pass both houses and move on for the President's signature over the next two years. However, there will still be a lot of education action taking place—primarily in the education committees.

The last Congress left one significant piece of education policy work undone: the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, which was last updated in 2008. Restructuring this law may fall to the Senate Health Education Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee. This committee will continue to be chaired by Lamar Alexander (R-TN), who served as Secretary of Education under President George H.W. Bush. Chairman Alexander is one of the few legislators who has a proven ability to work constructively across the aisle, so it is possible that he may be able to work with the Democrats on his committee to pull together a bipartisan approach to the Higher Education Act that could pass both the Senate and the House.

One of the biggest challenges in piecing together a new Higher Education Act will be to [update the Federal Pell Grant program](#). Pell grants are the primary supplement that makes college affordable for low income students. Because college tuition has been increasing at a much higher rate than wages, the maximum grants no longer provide enough assistance for some students in poverty. One potential way to solve this problem would be to increase the maximum annual awards from \$6,095 to \$12,000 while limiting tuition increases to the rate of inflation at colleges receiving these higher Pell grant awards.

While the Senate Education Committee works on creating a bipartisan Higher Education Act, the House Committee on Education and the Workforce is likely to focus on one of the “implied” (rather than enumerated) powers of Congress, oversight of the Federal Agencies – in this case the Department of Education. You may want to consider prayers for the next few months for Secretary DeVos, an avowed Christian, who will be on the hot seat. [Congressional Democrats have been particularly critical of DeVos's new procedures for investigation of Civil Rights allegations lodged against schools](#), as well as her approval of Every Student Succeeds state plans that they feel have not dealt adequately with the neediest children. The new Chair of the House Committee is likely to be Rep. Bobby Scott (D-VA). Scott is a former civil rights attorney which should prepare him well for the Committee investigations.

We can also expect Democrats to be critical of [changes that Secretary DeVos recently approved](#) to the procedures universities follow when they investigate campus sexual abuse allegations that provide more due process protections for accused sex offenders. Notably, Chairman Alexander has already praised the changes while Chairman Scott says the administration should, “scrap this proposal.”

If that were not enough controversy, in recent weeks the decision was made by the Trump administration to rescind Obama-era discipline guidance aimed at reigning in suspension and expulsion practices that fall disproportionately on disadvantaged students. We will cover the effects of this decision in the next column.

While the Congressional hearings will probably be contentious, we should keep in mind that the founders intentionally created a system in which change is very difficult. The President, the House and

the Senate are each selected using different methods which causes them to represent different interests and hold in check the interests of the other entities. The work of governing in our republic is one that requires much debate and only produces change through compromise. Also, the oversight function of Congress, while never pleasant to watch, does help prevent corruption and abuse of power. We should always be prayerful for our leaders (1 Timothy 2:1-4) as they have a very difficult task often fraught with conflict. But we need not become overly anxious about the divisions and should strive to not let these debates break our fellowship with other Christians or impact our Christian testimony. Rather, we should take Paul's warnings in Chapter 3 of Titus to heart, "to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people," and to "avoid foolish controversies."

Political conflicts may not be the only reason for stalemates in education policy changes. Michael Petrilli of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute recently wrote an interesting column titled, "[The end of education policy?](#)" He argues that the various interest groups in education have, "fought each other to a draw," and that we can expect a decade-long pause in the creation of new education policy. He also says that that it is now time for a, "Golden Age of Educational Practice." That sounds a lot like giving teachers the time and freedom to improve their lessons and do what they know will benefit their students most.

Ephesians 6 tells us to:

*Obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. (Ephesians 6:5-9)*

There are two sources of authority for us here: Our earthly masters, which includes our principals and Federal, state and local policy makers, who pass laws and regulations that we do our best to implement faithfully; and the Lord, who we are to place above all other authorities. When policy makers aren't keeping us busy implementing change in our classrooms, this gives us more time to focus on "doing the will of God from the heart." In either event we are blessed with a calling to serve students well, "with a good will as to the Lord."

Please share your thoughts on this column that you would like other readers to see by entering them in the form below. Personal comments can be sent to [JMitchell@ceai.org](mailto:JMitchell@ceai.org). John Mitchell is the Washington, DC Area Director for the Christian Educators Association.