



THE WASHINGTON EDUCATION WATCH

Congress Returns from Vacation

Like many educators across the country, over the past few weeks our nation’s lawmakers returned from their summer breaks. I hope that the first few weeks of your school year went much better than the return of Congress.

Before they left for vacation Congress took care of one big piece of work. They [voted to raise the nation's debt limit by \\$2 trillion](#), freeing up \$324 billion for them to spend over the next two years. They did this in a bipartisan manner, and said that when they got back into town they would quickly pass the budget bills required to fund the federal government for the upcoming fiscal year which begins in October. They pledged to do this without including any “poison pills”—provisions that are so despised by one party or the other that they would ensure that the budget bills could not pass both the Democrat controlled House and the Republican controlled Senate.

However, it only took a couple of days for both parties to [propose poison pills](#) that they want to attach to spending bills in the Senate. The Democrats want to stop the President from blocking federal funding of organizations that provide abortions or abortion referrals and foreign aid being used to support abortions. Senate Republicans have suggested a measure that would provide \$12 billion in border wall funding to replace funds that the President redirected to wall building from military construction projects. These poison pills triggered the Senate to postpone deliberations of spending measures including the education budget. This makes it very likely that the Senate will not be able to pass spending bills this month and will instead pass temporary, continuing resolutions, that will continue funding at current levels.

Senators and Representatives find the "poison pills" hard to resist because they know that they will inspire the base of their respective parties to become involved in the 2020 elections.

Indeed, the Democrats had one of their presidential primary debates scheduled for September 12, making it difficult for them to focus on much else. In preparation for the debate a new organization, Education 2020, emerged. Education 2020 is a coalition of 20 liberal education organizations including both national teacher unions. Days before the debate they [released a paper advocating six fundamental principles](#) that they wanted the candidates to discuss. While the paper doesn't come right out and say it, the overall thrust of document is that the Federal Government should take a much larger role in public education.

The Democrat candidates did spend about 15 minutes of the nearly 3-hour debate on education. This was enough time for every candidate to make a basic statement about what they think should happen with education from the Federal level—but not enough time to get into the details.

Here is what I learned from their comments on education:

- Support for charter schools varies among the candidates. Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders seemed to be opposed to them, while Andrew Yang and Cory Booker supported the “good” ones, and Julian Castro suggested more transparency and accountability.
- They all seem to want teachers to be paid more. Both Bernie Sanders and Joe Biden suggested that the minimum teacher salary should be \$60,000 and Kamala Harris mentioned a proposal she floated a few months ago to provide a Federal supplement to state education funding that would provide a \$13,500 raise for all teachers.
- Andrew Yang, Julian Castro and Cory Booker indicated that the way to close achievement gaps was to take a broad outside-of-school approach, providing more support for families and blighted neighborhoods.
- Joe Biden made it a point in his opening presentation to say that Federal funding for high needs schools should be almost tripled—from \$15 billion to \$40 billion.

It bears noting that of these items, only the last—funding for high needs schools—has been a traditional role for the Federal Government (ever since the passage of ESEA in 1965). Federal funding for charter schools or teacher salaries would open vast new expanses for Federal involvement in education. None of the candidates even attempted to articulate a justification for changing the method used for governing or funding education.

The day after the Democrat debate, [Education Next released their annual survey of public opinion on the public schools](#). A couple survey items related to education issues raised at the debate:

- After a slight dip a few years ago, **support for charter schools** resumed growth among all groups. They are currently supported by 48% of the general public, while 60% of Republicans and 40% of Democrats supported them. About 42% of all teachers support charters.
- **Support for teacher salary increases** also continued to rise with about 72% of the public supporting this, including 60% of Republicans and 83% of Democrats.
- **The public is very confused about where school funding comes from:**
 - Federal Funding: the average person thinks the Federal Government provides 28% of public-school funding; in reality it is far less—only 8%
 - State Funding: the average person thinks their state government provides 37% of public-school funding; in reality it is far more—46%.
 - State Funding: the average person thinks their local government provides 35% of public-school funding. Again, the reality is much higher—46%.

The debate and the results of this survey indicate that depending on the outcome of the 2020 elections, the issues of charter schools, teacher salaries and closing achievement gaps could each shift away from local decision making to being dominated by Federal Government control. We could be on the verge of upsetting an apple cart of education issues that have come into delicate balance over the past few decades. This does not mean that there might not be a better way to do things. However, if you share my concern about this, you may want to pray over these verses that relate to the separation of powers:

- *Exodus 18:25-26: The verses explaining why Moses created various levels of government. **Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And they judged the people at all times. Any hard case they brought to Moses, but any small matter they decided themselves.***
- Jeremiah 17:9 – A verse that John Adams and other framers of the Constitution took under consideration when they designed the Federal system and separation of powers. ***The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?***
- Ecclesiastes 5:8 – A verse that explains the need to have one level or branch of government overseeing another: ***If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness, do not be amazed at the matter, for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them.***

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. John Mitchell is the Washington, D.C. Area Director for Christian Educators Association International.

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