

Washington Update November 1, 2019

Dear Colleagues:

It's been quite a week in DC. The most impressive news is having our home team -- the Nationals -- win the World Series, despite their substantial underdog status. My son was in Houston for the final two games and I'm not sure he will ever recover from the thrill. Other than that, the House voted to proceed officially with the impeachment process on a totally partisan basis -- and that promises to suck the oxygen out of any sort of Congressional agenda for months.

1. Are we Headed to a Government Shutdown....Again?

While the Senate made progress on funding bills this week, big hurdles remain. The Senate passed a package of four appropriations bill with a bipartisan vote of 84-9 – the first funding bills to pass the Senate. However, Senate Democrats blocked movement on the package of two large spending bills: Defense and Labor/HHS/Education. They are not happy that President Trump is insisting on funding for his border wall and that the Labor/HHS/Education bill's spending level is so low.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, House and Senate Congressional leaders are trying to come to some agreement about the top line spending levels for all 12 bills. They acknowledge that all the bills will not be completed by the November 21 deadline and that a short-term extension will be needed. But they are hopeful that all of the bills can be completed by the end of the year.

Sen. Schumer (D-NY) raised the specter of President Trump prompting a government shutdown by refusing to agree to funding bills – particularly if funding for his border wall is not included at the level he desires. Schumer noted that as impeachment moves forward, President Trump will be looking for diversions and a government shutdown will be tempting. "I'm increasingly worried that President Trump will want to shut down the government again because of impeachment," Schumer said. "He always likes to create diversions. I hope and pray he won't want to cause another government shutdown because it might be a diversion away from impeachment."

The House will be in recess next week, so progress on spending caps for the 12 bills is unlikely.

See: <https://www.politico.com/news/2019/10/31/senate-spending-bills-border-wall-063028>

2. House Committee Adopts Higher Education Act Rewrite Along Partisan Lines

On Thursday, the House Committee on Education and Labor adopted their Higher Education Act rewrite, HR 4674, with a partisan vote. Committee Chair Rep. Bobby Scott (D-VA) has indicated that he would like to see the bill, the College Affordability Act, on the House floor for a vote before the end of the year. The bill is massive – 1200 pages with a \$400 billion price tag– and makes a number of complex and significant changes to the law, which has not been reauthorized since 2008. HR 4674 was introduced two weeks ago, leaving higher education advocates scrambling to unpack the complex bill.

In a three-day markup the committee considered over 40 amendments, as well as a substitute bill offered by the lead Republican on the Committee, Virginia Foxx (R-NC). Most of the Republican amendments were rejected along party lines.

Key features of the passed bill include a mechanism for tuition-free community college, increasing the amount of Pell grants, making Pell Grants available for high-quality, short-term programs where students can quickly build competitive skills in high-demand jobs, allowing current student financial aid debt holders to lower their interest rate and changing the rules for for-profit colleges' participation in federal student financial aid.

The Republican substitute bill offered would have eliminated TEACH grants and been more favorable for for-profit colleges and alternative providers for teacher education. Republicans said the Scott bill included too big of an increase in federal spending and too much of an emphasis on four-year degrees rather than career and technical training.

The Senate has yet to move on a comprehensive rewrite of the Higher Education Act. Because this bill is partisan, it has little to no chance of being considered in the Republican controlled Senate. However, this bill is likely to stand as a marker for Democrats moving forward.

See <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wesleywhistle/2019/10/31/house-democrats-pass-higher-education-bill-out-of-committee/#2b764b754ced>

You can watch the markup here and view a list of all amendments that were offered: <https://edlabor.house.gov/hearings/hr-4674-college-affordability-act>

3. The Nation's Report Card is Not a Good one for Students

This week the 2019 results were released from the National Assessment of Education Progress – NAEP – a student achievement assessment periodically taken by about 600,000 students in reading in math. A few take aways include:

- The average eighth-grade reading score declined in more than half of the states
- The average fourth-grade reading score declined in 17 states
- Math scores remained relatively stable in most states
- Only 35% of fourth graders were proficient in reading
- In general, the highest performing students are stagnating while lower performing students are losing ground

Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos described the results as a “student achievement crisis.” She called on states to embrace her school choice agenda. Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-CT), chair of the Labor/HHS/Education appropriations subcommittee, said DeVos was “exploiting” the test results to “spread lies and promote her privatization agenda.” Mike Magee of Chiefs for Change said “This is a disturbing pattern, one that is consistent with our nation’s growing economic inequality and history of structural discrimination in education, housing and access to opportunity.”

Superintendent of public instruction in Virginia, James Lane, noted the increase in schools of students who are impacted by poverty and trauma and that the system needs to recruit and retain high-quality teachers who are equipped to meet the needs of a changing student population.

See: <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>

See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/30/us/reading-scores-national-exam.html>

Wishing you a great weekend. I will be in New Orleans next week for the annual Teacher Education Division of CEC's conference, so there will be no Washington Update next week. Hope to see you in NOLA!

Best,

Jane

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