



The Blessing of Federalism Provides Wisdom but Few Definite Answers

As we each explore how we can best serve students in these most unusual days, many are discovering new blessings. At a Good Friday online prayer service, one of my teacher friends shared how much comfort she receives each day when the governor of Maryland shares snippets of his faith along with advice, advisories, and executive orders pertaining to the coronavirus crisis. I doubt that my friend would find as much comfort in the briefings provided by President Trump as I do, yet I saw in her comment a glimmer of a wonderful blessing bestowed on us by the Lord through the framers of the Constitution—the blessing of a federal form of government.

The Constitution, particularly the [Tenth Amendment](#), created a structure that limits the Federal Government to a set of enumerated powers reserving all other powers to the individual states or the people. At a time of national crisis, some might wish for a stronger Federal Government not hampered by the variations and vagaries of fifty different governors and their state legislatures. But these variances recognize that all men are flawed—we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. A federal system that shares power ensures that we will never be dominated by a state or national tyrant. Our nation benefits from a multitude of counselors that Proverbs tells us brings both safety (11:14) and victory (24:6). Each of us is free to look to the thoughts of the president, a variety of outspoken congressmen and senators, as well as fifty governors, thousands of state legislators, and hundreds of thousands of local officials for guidance. Each of these levels of government are held in check by the others and held accountable when we vote. This blessing of limited government also protects the high

degree of freedom we enjoy as individuals to respond to the Holy Spirit's leading in our lives.

The division of power and system of checks and balances make it difficult right now to provide specific answers to some very important questions that school employees, parents, and students have. But we can look at what is going on across the states and around the world to learn what might happen next. Here are some questions you might have and some information on each:

When will the schools reopen?

This [map from Education Week is updated every day](#) and currently indicates that the public schools in every state, including 7 states where the states only *recommended* closure, are shut down. Montana is currently the most optimistic state, projecting that their schools could open as soon as April 24. Last week, Montana was projected to open on April 13. These dates are all likely to move around significantly as new data emerges regarding the virus. What seems most likely at this point is that the current school year is over and hopefully schools will be able to restart on schedule for next year.

As this [article from Australia](#) indicates, we can take some solace in knowing that nations on the other side of the globe are also struggling with answers to this question. And, lest some think that federalism is the problem, note that even the highly centralized and top-down [government of China is planning a very uneven reopening of schools](#) with different dates for different provinces and different grade levels. Just like in the U.S., parents in China are concerned about the safety of their children. One parent in Shandong province said, "If he goes back to school, we worry about his safety because there are new asymptomatic carriers almost every day. But if he stays at home and others go to school, we worry that his scores [on tests] then won't be good enough to enter a good university."

Will school budgets be affected by the crisis?

Probably. The [National Council of State Legislatures](#) reports that over half of the states postponed their legislative session in March because of the coronavirus, delaying the adoption of next year's budgets. All states will need to have their budgets in place before the start of the next budget year so they will be working on this into the summer. Some states are taking steps in the current budget for what is certain to be an economic downturn. Maryland announced a [state-wide budget freeze](#) that will place a hold on all government expenditures, except payroll and coronavirus-related expenses, and is likely to reconsider budget increases already passed for next year. However, we can be

encouraged that states like Maryland are prioritizing payroll. Until there is much more certainty, it is possible that anticipated salary increases will be put on hold, or in some cases, may be cut. But keeping teachers and government workers employed seems to be a high priority.

Will we continue to do online instruction?

That seems likely. Already some proponents of online instruction are using the crisis to justify moving more education to online platforms. This headline from a *Forbes* article sums it up well, [The Coronavirus Pandemic Has Unleashed A Revolution In Education: From Now On, Blended Learning Will Be The Benchmark.](#)

While moving our instruction to online platforms has been, for many, a productive way to use our time during the shutdown, it also has critical limitations. Fortunately, we had much of the school year to get to know our students face to face—their strengths, weaknesses, and unique personalities. This has helped us though the online experience and reminded many of us—including parents and students—how essential teacher-student relationships are to quality instruction.

How will senior graduations be impacted this year?

Certainly, many graduation ceremonies will be canceled or altered, but what about actual graduation? [Research done by The74](#) shows that some states are granting broad discretion to local school districts to change graduation requirements while many states have already waived some of their requirements.

Surprisingly, New York State has canceled the highly esteemed 144-year-old Regents exams scheduled for June.

What about education standards for younger students?

This is a very important issue that has had little discussion. Particularly at the earliest grades in subjects that depend on building on foundations laid in previous years, skipping some content will hinder students academically for years to come. This is an even more critical concern for struggling students. So it was heartening to read that Michael Petrilli, the President of The Fordham Foundation, an education think tank based in Ohio, recommends that [struggling students at the lower grades repeat the same grade next school year.](#) While this solution will not be appropriate for all schools or all students, it has merit. For students who need help, this could be a real blessing. Because we are blessed with a decentralized education system that encourages flexibility, meeting the academic needs of every student is a solution that is within our grasp.

Clearly the responses to these important questions are insufficient and leave us wanting more. Christ encourages us in the Sermon on The Mount to build our homes on the solid rock of faith in Him (Matt 7:24-27), yet we know that we sometimes find ourselves in fear or doubt.

If the uncertainty of these days leaves you feeling uneasy, remember that Jesus did not let Peter sink beneath the waves when he was in doubt but instead reached out to him (Matt 14:30-31). He wants you to turn to Him now with your anxieties and promises that if you do, “The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:6-7). The Lord is ready and more than able to bless you in this time of worldwide anxiety.

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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