Education groups alternatively hailed and assailed the U.S. Supreme Court decision this week prohibiting state bans on funding for religious schools, saying it would have a significant impact nationally.
Yet in Georgia, the reaction was subdued.

The high court’s ruling in Carson v. Makin struck down a restriction on religious school funding in Maine, but Georgia does not exclude religious schools.

“I think it’s going to be a non-issue here,” said Lisa Morgan, president of the Georgia Association of Educators, a teacher advocacy and lobbying group.

Still, Becky Pringle, president of the National Education Association, said the 6-3 ruling by the court’s conservative majority was a radical blow to public education. “We are witnessing one of the most extreme Supreme Courts in modern history rewrite the most basic social commitments of our society,” she said in a statement after the decision was announced Tuesday.

On the other hand, former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, who founded ExcelinEd, a school choice advocacy group, called the decision an important victory for educational freedom “not just in Maine but all across the country.”

In Georgia, private schools that get taxpayer funding are not held to the same standard as public schools, which must administer annual Milestones tests measuring what their students learned. That’s one reason both Pringle and Morgan say giving money to private religious schools undermines public education.

But Morgan’s ho-hum reaction to the court decision was based on a simple fact: Over a hundred private religious schools are already eligible to receive taxpayer-based subsidies in Georgia.

The state has two private school scholarship programs. One is state-funded, for students with special needs. The other is paid for with tax credits and is open to all students.

The special needs program, which is accepting applicants for the next school year now, spent more than $34 million on tuition for about 5,300 students at 256 private schools during the 2020-21 school year. At least 100 of those schools had a religious reference in their name, typically the word “Christian.”

The tax credit scholarship program, which lawmakers recently expanded to $120 million annually, is decentralized and operated by nonprofits. The largest, Georgia GOAL, publicly shares its list of participating schools. There are 170 of them, more than 60 with a religious reference in the name.

Asked about the court decision when he was in Atlanta Tuesday, U.S. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona expressed optimism that public schools will have adequate funding, in part because the federal government gave them billions to weather the pandemic.

“I’m confident that we’re going to continue to see investments in education not only at the federal level but also at the state and local level,” Cardona said, “because as a parent, I can tell you when schools shut down, everything else shut down, and we know the importance of our schools.”

Ty Tagami is the state education reporter for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Since joining the newspaper in 2002, he has written about everything from hurricanes to homelessness. He has deep experience covering local government and education, and can often be found under the Gold Dome when lawmakers meet or in a school somewhere in the state.