

News Watch Article: DC998

## CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND CHOICE IN THE CLASSROOM

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With all the debate about vouchers and school choice, an examination of public schools demonstrates that the people who manage the system generally are the only ones with any real freedom to choose, and they'd like to keep it that way.

Social engineers posing as educators make all the decisions about curriculum. They choose to teach students as young as five years old everything from the "positive" facts of homosexuality to the "truth" of evolution.

Parents, on the other hand, who harbor the quaint notion that school is for math and English, become the object of ridicule or are ignored when they protest. Those who don't have the resources to send their children to a private school or to educate them at home are stuck with the school in their district.

That's why the idea of school vouchers is taking hold. Parents like the idea that their school board would grant them a certain amount of money, and let them send their children and that money to the school of their choice, private or public.

Professional educators and teachers' unions, who generally lean left on politics and social issues, guard their power of choice. They fear that giving parents a choice of schools, which amounts to open competition, will cripple some schools.

"They love the word 'choice' except for school choice," says Krista Kafer of the Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C. "The kinds of people who don't want a diversity of providers do want diversity in social issues. They'll teach a course on Islam but they wouldn't touch Christianity with a ten-foot pole. That's their idea of diversity.

"I think the problem with anti-school-choice people is they really believe parents aren't informed enough or smart enough to make choices for their children," Kafer told the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL.

Public school parents, however, have cause for optimism. In June 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* that a school-choice plan in Cleveland, Ohio, is constitutional. The Institute for Justice called it the most important ruling for education since *Brown v. Board of Education*.

"The constitutional cloud over school choice is finally lifted," Clint Bolick, vice president of the Institute for Justice, wrote on the day of the June decision. "This decision removes a major impediment to school choice legislation around the nation." Momentum is building, says Kafer, who specializes in school-choice issues at Heritage. "I think it's lent it some legitimacy to have the Supreme Court rule in favor of vouchers," she says. "It gives states the green light to enact school choice without the fear of it being unconstitutional."

In an earlier opinion that gave traction to school choice, *Mitchell v. Helms* in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, the U.S. Supreme Court drew a direct bead on the precedent set by late-nineteenth-century U.S. Congressman James Gillespie Blaine from Maine. Blaine's aversion to Catholic schools prompted him to attempt to amend the U.S. Constitution to keep government money out of "sectarian" schools. The Blaine Amendment didn't pass nationally, but its ghost haunts many a school system — 38 states included variations of Blaine in their own constitutions, according to the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty.

In another recent ruling, *Mitchell v. Helms*, the Supreme Court ruled that the Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, school system could legally lend a hand to private and parochial schools.

In its ruling that government money and equipment could be used in private and parochial schools, the Court cited its reasoning in the 1986 case of *Witters v. Washington Department of Services for the Blind*, and held that a state could provide tuition for a blind person studying at a Christian college.

“Any aid...that ultimately flows to religious institutions does so only as a result of the genuinely independent and private choices of aid recipients,” the court said. Since Washington’s program is made available without regard to a student’s choice of school and “creates no financial incentive for students to undertake sectarian education,” the Court concluded that “the fact that aid goes to individuals means that the decision to support religious education is made by the individual, not by the State.”

Regarding the Blaine Amendment, Justice Clarence Thomas, author of the court’s pro-school-choice opinion in June 2000, wrote that “hostility to aid to pervasively sectarian schools has a shameful pedigree that we do not hesitate to disavow.”

“Consideration of the [Blaine] amendment,” Justice Thomas wrote, “arose at a time of pervasive hostility to the Catholic Church and to Catholics in general, and it was an open secret that ‘sectarian’ was code for ‘Catholic.’...This doctrine, born of bigotry, should be buried now.”

The paradox in the fight for options in education is that organizations such as People for the American Way and the National Education Association, which oppose school choice, are the groups that demand choice in almost every other issue. “These same groups are the ones who stand up for peoples’ rights and stand up against prejudice, yet they cling to these programs that would theoretically prevent freedom of choice,” Mary Kayne Heinze, media relations director at the Center for Education Reform (CER), told the JOURNAL. CER’s 2002 poll showed a majority of Americans favor school choice.

The Blaine Amendment and its related constraints may be losing their grip due to the weight of a dozen organizations such as Heinze’s CER, the Becket Fund, the Institute for Justice, the Black Alliance for Educational Options, and the Heritage Foundation, all of which are battling for the right of parents to choose the who and the where of their children’s education.

Additional good news for the school choice movement comes from the results of two polls, taken in the summer of 2002, which show that Americans are demanding and receiving more education options, from the obvious choices of private schools and home schooling to the much-debated voucher systems that allow parents to pick a public school for their child.

The two polls appear to contradict one another on the issue of school choice. An examination of the polls’ questions, however, explains the contradiction.

In one of its questions, the Phi Delta Kappa (PDK) poll employed words that implied class distinctions: “Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend *at public expense?*” (emphasis added).

Fifty-two percent of the respondents opposed the idea, as PDK presented it, and 46 percent approved of it.

In its more neutral question, however, the CER poll omitted the source of funding for school choice: “How much do you support or oppose providing parents with the option of sending their children to the school of their choice — either public, private or parochial — rather than only to the school to which they are assigned?”

The result was that 76 percent of the respondents said that they “strongly/somewhat support” choice, while 20 percent said that they “somewhat/strongly oppose.”

Broken down by race, Whites favored the idea by 77 percent, African Americans by 75 percent, and Hispanics by 70 percent. This is an important distinction, because opponents of choice often contend that underprivileged African Americans and other people of color would suffer if parents are given more freedom to choose.

Another result in the PDK poll was cause for hope for proponents of school choice: 52 percent of the respondents favored a proposal “that would allow parents to send their school-age children to any

public, private, or church-related school they choose. For those parents choosing nonpublic schools, the government would pay all or part of the tuition.”

Cause for optimism was even stronger for proponents, though, when considering responses to a similar question from the CER poll: “How much are you in favor of or against allowing poor parents to be given the tax dollars allotted for their child’s education and permitting them to use those dollars in the form of a scholarship to attend a private, public or parochial school of their choosing?”

The favorable rating increased by 11 points over the PDK proposal, to 63 percent in favor of the idea. Broken down by race, 72 percent of African Americans polled favor it compared to 62 percent of Whites.

The PDK poll showed a similar increase when broken down by race: 68 percent of non-Whites favored the idea, whereas only 49 percent of Whites favored it. The PDK poll did not segregate the results of its first question by race.

Besides the poor quality of public education in general, the nonacademic, social-engineering subjects also are an issue. “There are some pretty divisive issues about curriculum and social values that are being taught,” Heritage’s Kafer says. “Some school districts are adopting pretty left-leaning social agendas that are making some parents uncomfortable, particularly with the homosexual tolerance agenda. There are a lot of us out there that think school ought to be for academics.”

Opponents of school choice often pit the socially and financially disadvantaged against the middle class. They warn that choice and vouchers will only hurt the children who already are hurting the most, and that giving parents freedom to choose diminishes choices for the poor. Those arguments, Kafer says, while marginally effective, are spurious.

The key to winning freedom of choice, she says, is to persuade middle-class parents that their families will benefit. “The poor are really clamoring for choice. You have to make the case that choice is valuable. Competition is a good thing, and the ability to choose is a good thing. Freedom serves all.”

Nothing will improve the nation’s educational system, however, until parents pay attention and take the reins from government at all levels. “Government accountability,” Kafer says, “is always a proxy for true accountability, which is parents.”

– Jay C. Grelen