

School prayer an opportunity for compromise

by JOHN CARPAY

The recent controversy over the recitation of the Lord's Prayer at a public school in Taber underscores the need for real choice and real diversity in public education.

Some say religion has no place in public schools. Others argue that Christians of various denominations, who make up the overwhelming majority of Taber's citizens, pay taxes for public education and are therefore entitled to a school that reflects and practises their beliefs.

This controversy shows that a one-size-fits-all model for public education can function only in a homogeneous society where everyone (or almost everyone) has the same world view or philosophical assumptions.

In Canada's pluralistic society, many people adhere to a variety of non-Christian world views, including atheism, agnosticism, Judaism, Islam and other religions. While atheist, agnostic and other non-Christian parents have every right to demand that their children not be required to recite the Lord's Prayer in school, their position is neither neutral nor objective.

A public school's curriculum, policies and practices will inevitably be based on a world view that provides answers to metaphysical questions such as: Why do we exist? What is right and wrong? How can we know what is right and wrong? How should we treat other people? Why should we treat them that way?

Atheists and agnostics have many different answers to these questions, in the same way that Christians, Hindus and Sikhs propose answers based on their respective world views. The slogan "no religion in public schools"

presupposes that people who do not adhere to any particular religion have no answers to metaphysical questions and therefore no world view.

The use of public schools to indoctrinate children into one single ideology is a hallmark of totalitarian regimes. Conversely, respect for the right and responsibility of parents to educate their children is one of the hallmarks of a free society. A government's ban on the teaching of racial hatred, terrorism, or the violent overthrow of our democracy should not be confused with the imposition of a supposedly "neutral" secular ideology on all children.

Parents, not politicians and bureaucrats, have a right and a responsibility to educate their children. The right of Christian parents to insist that their children's school reinforce the world view taught at home is no less valid than an atheist's insistence that schools reflect and teach her world view to her children.

But pretending that a public school's policies and practices can achieve "neutrality" is naive. Socialism, feminism, humanism and environmentalism are among the lenses through which public schools impart information to children.

One can like or dislike various lenses, but pretending that knowledge and information can be taught to children without any lens at all is silly. For atheists to impose their own lens on all children is just as wrong as the imposition of an Islamic or Buddhist lens on a public school's curriculum or practices. Hence the inability of public schools to meet needs by way of a one-size-fits-all model.

The right of parents to educate their children according to the parents' world view can be accommodated more easily in large urban centres, where members of various minorities exist in adequate numbers to provide real choice in education through different schools. That choice, it should be said, is not limited to what world view governs a school's curriculum and practices. Parents should also have the right to choose traditionalist, progressive or other approaches to teaching and learning.

Taber's population of 8,104 does not justify a multitude of public schools. In small Canadian towns with very few schools, respecting parental authority requires accommodating the legitimate concerns of minorities. For example, no child should be required to participate in prayer, in the same way that parents should be able to exempt their children from sex-ed classes that parents see as being taught from an amoral or immoral perspective.

Accommodating minority interests is very different from imposing one minority view (or the majority view) on all parents and all children. Accommodation is hard work. It requires listening, compromising, creativity and learning through trial and error. Accommodation forces citizens to interact with each other, rather than calling upon the government to impose a one-size-fits-all model. The citizens of Taber have an opportunity to engage in the hard work of citizenship on which our free society depends.

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