



School Choice Could Have Stopped Battle Over Holocaust-Denial at a Florida High School

We wouldn't have to squabble over control of shared institutions if we were free to pick the right schools for our kids.

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It took a year and a half for public school officials in Palm Beach County, Florida, to remove a high school principal who wouldn't commit to saying that the Holocaust is a documented fact. It would have saved a lot of time and aggravation if parents horrified by the administrator's indifference to history had been freer to just pick a better school, managed by better people.

Beyond arguments about teaching philosophy, quality of instructors, and test results, endless battles over curricula make it clear that governments are lousy stewards of education. Conflict is baked into the concept of letting government officials exercise near-monopoly power over schools.

The controversy over former Principal William Latson began with a parent contacting Spanish River High School in April 2018 to inquire as to how the Holocaust was taught to the heavily Jewish student population. Latson responded that the Holocaust was taught, but not emphasized, because not all families have the same beliefs about its occurrence. He doubled down in a second email, writing:

Not everyone believes the Holocaust happened and you have your thoughts but we are a public school and not all of our parents have the same beliefs so they will react differently, my thoughts or beliefs have nothing to do with this because I am a public servant. I have the role to be politically neutral but support all groups in the school... I can't say the Holocaust is a factual, historical event because I am not in a position to do so as a school district employee.

And so began a running battle that culminated, just days ago, in Latson's reassignment to a school district position that allows the professional educator to apply his slippery grasp of history and eccentric punctuation in a less public way.

The debate over what to teach kids at Spanish River High School echoes similar controversies around the country over lessons about events past and present. It varies from other such incidents primarily in that it represents a mushy failure to take *any* position rather than the triumph of one ideological approach or interpretation over another.

"Americans are diverse—ethnically, religiously, ideologically—but all must pay for public schools. The intention is good: to bring people together and foster social harmony," the Cato Institute notes on its [Public Schooling Battle Map](#), which tracks education disagreements nationwide. "But rather than build bridges, public schooling often forces people into wrenching conflict."

In Michigan over the past year, conservatives and liberals [squabbled](#) over whether the U.S. is a "republic" or a "democracy"—and that's just where the disagreement begins. Lessons over the Alamo, the causes of the Civil War, and states rights set off [similar fights in Texas](#).

Curriculum battles have been [common in government-run schools](#), since they offer an opportunity for victors to "correctly" teach children while suppressing the alleged errors of the opposition. But modern curriculum battles occur in a country where intolerance of disagreement is [widespread](#) and on the rise (82 percent of polled likely voters said last year that they think [Americans are less tolerant of each other's opinions](#)). Education doesn't help, either: Better educated people are [less understanding of opponents' beliefs](#). That makes conflicts more intractable than ever.

How do public school administrators and teachers keep their "customers" happy when tweaking lesson plans to please one faction means alienating another? Almost certainly, they can't.

In this environment, William Latson very likely tried and failed to walk an unwalkable line by refusing to commit to fundamental historical facts so he wouldn't anger anybody. And Latson didn't confine his bureaucratic slipperiness to this one issue—it seems to be his guiding philosophy.

"I do the same with information about slavery," Latson told the mother in an [email](#). "I don't take a position but allow for the information to be presented and parents to be parents and educate their students accordingly."

"The mother, who asked not to be named to protect her child's identity, said in an interview that she did not believe Latson was anti-Semitic but worried that he feared confronting parents who deny the Holocaust's reality," [reported](#) *The Palm Beach Post*.

Ultimately, refusing to take a position in a futile bid at inoffensiveness bred as big a controversy as the sort of curriculum battle Latson hoped to avoid.

Ironically, Florida is actually pretty good when it comes to [educational choice](#), offering charter schools, scholarships, relatively easy homeschooling, and virtual schools. But traditional public schools remain the default choice for most students. Certainly, the families that currently use Spanish River High School should more thoroughly consider their education options and look for something better; voting with your feet now must be an improvement over waiting a year-plus for a bad administrator to be replaced. At the very least, they might consider charters, which have a [good track record in Florida](#), don't charge tuition, and offer a variety of educational approaches.

Improving access to education options and encouraging people to choose schools that work for them would replace curriculum battles with self-selection toward people's preferred offerings. In doing so, it could enhance the "social harmony" that public schools try and fail to generate. Graduating adults might even get along *better* if more families chose their kids' educations.

"Greater exposure to private schooling is not associated with any more or less political tolerance" than sending kids to public schools, wrote Albert Cheng of the University of Arkansas's Department of Education Reform in a 2014 paper published in the *Journal of School Choice*. Even more interesting, "students with greater exposure to homeschooling tend to be more politically tolerant—a finding contrary to the claims of many political theorists."

That makes sense, given that the public schools that are supposed to bring Americans together have done so only in the sense that the Colosseum brought together Christians and lions. Sure, it's a shared experience—but not necessarily a positive one.

Ultimately, curriculum battles are inevitable in schools that people are forced to fund with their taxes and which many children have to attend because of government restrictions on alternatives, including regulation of private education. Even for families with means, that can leave little from which to choose.

So, we can continue our endless battles over what our kids are taught, or we could enhance social harmony by replacing struggles for control of shared institutions with choices that prevent conflicts from occurring. There are choices to be made either way; either we make them for ourselves, or they'll be made for us.