



Thank God — or don't — for private schools

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Second Lady of the United States Karen Pence has a new job. She just started teaching at the Immanuel Christian School, which among many policies does not admit actively gay students and forbids employees from engaging in “homosexual or lesbian sexual activity.”

The gig has provoked much anger, but even the most disgusted — perhaps especially the most disgusted — should be thankful for one thing: the school is private.

If it weren't for private schools, people with Pence's conservative religious beliefs would have no choice but to try to impose them on every child. Unfortunately for us all, many Americans do not have such choice.

People have every right, of course, to condemn Pence, the school and beliefs they find bigoted. But they shouldn't assume that the views they despise have disappeared in all but the Pence household and a few other holdouts, as some commenters suggested in their responses, and hence are no threat to public schools.

Acceptance of homosexuality has expanded remarkably over the last 15 years, but a May 2018 Gallup poll still found that 30 percent of Americans believed “gay or lesbian relations” were “morally wrong,” and a 2014 Pew survey found that in five states at least pluralities believed that homosexuality “should be discouraged.” No doubt many local communities have majorities holding such views.

But hasn't religion been ejected from public schools by the U.S. Supreme Court? The court has judged any official religious practice unconstitutional, but there are still some public schools where overt religious activity persists, and many others where religious beliefs inevitably play a part.

The exact extent to which public schools reflect religious beliefs is unknown, but we have some clues it isn't trivial. In 2010, political scientists Michael Berkman and Eric Plutzer reported that a large majority of high school biology teachers soft-pedaled evolution, and as high as 21 percent endorsed creationism or its cousin, intelligent design, in their classes.

The Cato Institute's Public Schooling Battle Map — a database of values and identity-based disputes in public schools — contained 2,071 conflicts as of Jan. 18, and 323 were explicitly about religious issues. Many took place at the state level, subjecting all state residents to them, and others involved district or school impositions.

Recent examples include a conflict over a decades-long tradition of putting the three wise men on the roof of a Michigan elementary school; cheerleaders in Georgia selling t-shirts saying "In Dodge County, we stand for the flag, kneel for the cross;" and passage of a ballot initiative in Alabama allowing public schools to post the Ten Commandments.

Likely more widespread than efforts to advance religion are religious people battling policies they conclude would force them to violate their convictions. There is probably no better illustration than the transgender bathroom and locker room access disputes we've seen across the country.

If you believe that men and women in various states of undress should be separated, you have little choice but to fight to keep facilities segregated.

Many people offended by these religious convictions might conclude that they must simply build an impregnable wall between church and public school. But that would render religious people unequal under the law — their values could never affect the education for which they must pay — and it is naïve to think it is possible.

As we've seen, if unable to choose private schools without sacrificing their tax dollars — without such choice programs as vouchers or scholarship tax credits — many religious people will find ways to make the public schools reflect their morals and beliefs.

Of course, some religious people might try to impose their views on public schools even with such programs. In those cases, liberals should want school choice for their own use.

This is not a revolutionary concept. Choice among schools of varied religious and non-religious beliefs exists in many countries, and numerous states have private school choice programs.

Indeed, choice systems were sometimes created specifically to end painful wars for public school supremacy among highly religious people like Karen Pence and folks with different beliefs.

Unfortunately, American choice programs only reach about 500,000 students, meaning millions of families have little recourse but to try to impose their will on the public schools.

You may hate Karen Pence's beliefs and those of the school where she teaches. For your own protection — and a truly free society — you should want school choice for everyone.

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