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Why can't we stop fighting over Christmas?

In education, abolishing government's role would help

By Neal McCluskey

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Christmas is supposed to be a season of peace. But thanks to public schooling, for many Americans it is instead a time of war.

Battles over Christmas in public schools are, unfortunately, as inevitable as inflatable Santas and gridlocked malls, and this year is no exception.

After receiving complaints about a Nativity scene on a school bulletin board, the superintendent of Arkansas' Greene County Tech School District removed the image. That, however, sparked vehement complaints of a different sort, and the superintendent soon returned the scene to the board. "To be honest with you, we offended a lot more people by taking it down than leaving it up," Superintendent Jerry Noble said. "So we put it back up."

In Florida, Republican state Sen. Stephen R. Wise introduced legislation that would require school districts to call their late-December-to-early-January time off Christmas Break rather than Winter Break. The move elicited significant consternation, but Mr. Wise is insistent: "The reason we're off is because of Christmas."

In Texas, the Fort Worth school district created an uproar at the beginning of the month when district counsel Bertha Bailey Whatley sent a memo to staff instructing them to prohibit students from exchanging gifts or "personal holiday messages" during class. David Rapp, an attorney and father of two district students, attacked the memo, writing to the district that the guidelines trampled "the free exercise of religion."

Skirmishes like these illustrate a sad, simple truth: Public schools cannot serve their diverse people equally, forcing battles for supremacy.

But this is not a problem restricted to the holidays. Religious diversity has made government schooling a social battleground for more than 160 years.

In the 1840s, just as government schooling was becoming established, it ignited religious warfare, most prominently in New York City and Philadelphia. In those places, Roman

Catholics were gathering in large numbers, but the embryonic public schools were de facto Protestant institutions. Catholic requests for accommodations - most notably, the ability to use Catholic instead of Protestant versions of the Bible - were met with great opposition, and in the City of Brotherly Love, tensions eventually sparked two waves of street-level combat. By the time the Philadelphia Bible Riots had ended, at least 20 people had been killed and more than 100 wounded.

By the 1920s, the main ground contested in the schooling wars was between Christianity and secularization. The most prominent battle was the famous Scopes “Monkey” Trial, in which a Tennessee teacher was tried for introducing evolution in violation of state law. The trial was a national sensation, and its subject matter - how schools teach human origins - remains a huge source of conflict more than nine decades later.

By the 1970s, the tide had turned - religion was officially out of public schools - but conflict burned on. Perhaps most notably, Kanawha County, W.Va., was engulfed in near-civil war in 1974, with residents clashing over textbooks that the school district had selected. Among many things, the aggrieved were outraged by what they saw as government pushing not religious belief, but disbelief.

Protests eventually became so widespread and heated that they brought schools and even commerce to a halt. Eventually, outrage produced violence, including shootings and the dynamiting of schools.

A 1975 National Education Association report on the troubles identified the root problem: The district includes communities that “may be only miles apart in distance, but which are light-years apart in values, beliefs and in what they consider to be a ‘quality’ education.”

Today, in addition to endless grappling over [Christmas](#) and evolution, we see conflagrations erupting over anti-bullying policies that might restrict expression of religious views, sex education, accommodation of Muslim holidays and prayer times, and sundry other religious flash points.

Thankfully, there can be peace, but to have it, we must phase out government schooling and embrace liberty, the most basic of American values. We must give educators the freedom to teach as they wish, give parents control of education funding, and let teachers and families who share values come together. In other words, we must let people put down their arms and, finally, educate in peace.

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