



The School Religious Holidays Problem is Really a Public Schooling Problem

[Neal McCluskey](#)

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There's a lot of anger in Montgomery County, Maryland, after the school board voted to officially remove all religious holidays from the district calendar. The goal was to placate Muslim families tired of their kids having to go to school on Muslim holidays while children of other religions got their holidays off. The end result has been widespread indignation from people of all religious stripes. But religion is not the root problem. Public schooling is.

The people of Montgomery County are diverse, and a single system of schools for which they all must pay simply cannot treat them equally. Just look at the "solution" the board came up with: ending official recognition of Christian and Jewish holidays, but holidays like Christmas and Yom Kippur remaining days off because attendance would be too low to operate. Muslims, meanwhile, are too small a minority to greatly affect attendance, so the schools will still be open on their holidays. Semantic, but nonetheless painful, change, while real inequality remains.

Alas, this is not the first time Montgomery County has been riven over the handling of fundamental values in its public schools. For much of the 2000s the district was embroiled in a conflict over a proposed sex education curriculum, with everything from the treatment of homosexuality to condom use in dispute. Ultimately, the acrimony spilled out of school board meetings into court rooms and state officials' offices. It didn't end until those who said the curriculum violated their "sincere religious beliefs" lost both appeals to the state board of education and a state circuit court ruling.

If there can be any comfort for the people of Montgomery County, it is that they are not alone in finding themselves forced into battle by public schools. Values-based conflagrations are constantly flaring up across the country, whether the flashpoint is school holidays, student [prayer at graduations](#), reading [Huckleberry Finn](#), the content of [history curricula](#), or [myriad other matters](#). Indeed, the Cato Institute maintains [a national map](#) and database of such conflicts that have been fought since roughly 2005. It has over 1000 entries, and is no doubt missing numerous battles that have gone unreported in the major media.

Thankfully, there is a solution to all this cohesion-ripping conflict: school choice. Attach funding to students and let parents choose schools that share their values, religion, views on math curricula—you name it. Then people who want Christmas, Yom Kippur, Eid al-Adha, or any other holidays off could choose schools that shared their desires, and even the smallest of

minorities, who are all supposed to receive equal treatment under the law, could get what they wanted in both principle *and* practice.

But wouldn't basing education in individual choice see people break into balkanized groups? It's not an irrational fear, but the evidence suggests choice would likely be a net gain to social cohesion. In addition to avoiding inherently divisive conflict like we've seen repeatedly in Montgomery County and around the nation, there is good reason to believe that choice would be more effective at overcoming group divisions than putting all people under one, monolithic school system.

A major rationale behind magnet schools, for instance, is that meaningful racial integration can be better achieved by offering families something of mutual interest—an arts-based curriculum, science concentration, etc.—than pushing people of different races into one building. And [some empirical research](#) has shown more meaningful connections between students of different races in private than public schools, perhaps because choosing a school based on shared values or interests provides a bonding agent more powerful than the things that divide groups. Finally, research [has suggested](#) that chosen schools are better than public schools at instilling basic American civic values like voting and tolerance of others.

Of course, it is also in everyone's interest to embrace widely shared norms and values because doing is the key to living a comfortable, fruitful, life. But no one should be forced to sacrifice their most cherished personal values, or equality under the law, for the veneer of unity.

Montgomery County's school calendar fight shows that it is almost impossible to treat all people equally with a single system of public schools. To foster peace and real unity, educational freedom is key.

Neal McCluskey is the associate director of Cato's [Center for Educational Freedom](#).