

NOTHING TO STOP A SCHOOL FOR HATE ON VOUCHER PLAN

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Imagine an elementary school classroom with the 16 Commandments posted on every wall--not an expanded version of the Judeo-Christian Decalogue, but the articles of hate espoused by the World Church of the Creator.

Thou shalt attempt to populate "the lands of this Earth with white people entirely"; thou shalt treat "inferior, colored races" as "deadly enemies." Like that.

Above the chalkboard, idealized likenesses of Adolf Hitler and Matthew Hale, the doofus maximus of the World Church of the Creator. In the lesson plan, the 4 R's: readin', 'ritin', 'rithmetic and rahowa (the group's shorthand for "racial holy war," its simultaneously moronic and oxymoronic watchword).

Could happen tomorrow. No law against it, according to the Illinois State Board of Education. As long as the li'l racists in training got the basics and progressed normally, a Benjamin N. Smith Memorial Grammar School could operate relatively free from governmental interference.

A ghastly thought, to be sure, but, again, less ghastly than the idea of bureaucrats poking around in every private school and home school to make sure no one is teaching any lessons that fail to comport with our national ideals. If True Believers of any stripe want to make the effort to form their own schools, they're welcome to try.

Now, imagine this same elementary school classroom as an example of your tax dollars at work. Imagine such a school being able to succeed financially only because of a robust school-choice program, in which parents receive tuition vouchers funded by money now earmarked for public education.

Advocates for school-voucher programs tend to have in mind the mainstream parochial and non-sectarian private schools that do well compared with public schools. And so far, we have yet to see significant participation by the ideological fringe.

Chicago's Heartland Institute, a libertarian think tank that is pro-voucher, answered my question on this topic by directing me to a Web site listing attributes of acceptable school-choice legislation: "It must safeguard the interests of the families and the taxpayers by (denying voucher money to any) school that advocates unlawful behavior; teaches hatred of any person or group on the basis of race, ethnicity, color, national origin, religion or gender; or deliberately provides false or misleading information," said point No. 7.

Yet point No. 4 said such legislation "must introduce no new regulations on private schools that would threaten their mission, identity or autonomy."

"This is where you run right into the accountability dilemma," said Elliot Minberg, legal director of People for the American Way, a progressive, anti-voucher think tank. "You can't have it both ways. If you make schools accountable" by making sure they don't teach hatred or provide students with misleading information, "then you take away their autonomy.

"But if you give them their autonomy, then nothing prevents a World Church of the Creator school from starting up using public money."

Most voucher programs prohibit discriminatory admissions policies (though critics say that, in practice, religious schools have openly given preference to voucher-bearing applicants of their own faith), but few programs or proposals say anything about curriculum content. Minberg said that Ohio legislation for a pilot voucher program in Cleveland prohibited the teaching of hate in participating schools, but he said the restriction had yet to be tested and would be "a nightmare to enforce."

"Some religions have teachings that denigrate other religions," said Chris Ahmuty, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union in Wisconsin, where a voucher pilot program is proceeding in Milwaukee. "Where do you draw the line?"

Other groups--religious and not--have positions on the role of women and gays in society that are, let us say, less broadminded than civil rights law dictates. That's their prerogative, of course. But who, if anyone, would monitor the rhetoric in their tax-supported classrooms and set the standards of acceptability?

"When we debate this issue, the school-choice people always say, 'No, no, no, don't worry, it'll never happen,' " said Ahmuty, referring to the prospect of voucher-funded schools that promote prejudice, fear, violence and ethnic animosity. "But there are no real safeguards against it happening, and they're the first ones to oppose any safeguards. They want a free hand to use tax money to do what they will."

Imagine that.

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