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*Congress shall make
no law respecting an
establishment of religion
or prohibiting the free
exercise thereof; or
abridging the freedom
of speech, or of the press;
or the right of the people
peaceably to assemble,
and to petition the
Government for a redress
of grievances.*

Religious Liberty, Public
Education, and the Future
of American Democracy:
A Statement of Principles

This Statement of Principles is sponsored jointly by:

American Association of School Administrators

American Center for Law and Justice

American Federation of Teachers

Anti-Defamation League

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights

Central Conference of American Rabbis

Christian Coalition

Christian Educators Association International

Christian Legal Society

Coalition for the Community of Reason

Council on Islamic Education

The First Amendment Center

National Association of Elementary School Principals

National Association of Evangelicals

National Association of Secondary School Principals

National PTA

National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

National Education Association

National School Boards Association

People for the American Way Foundation

Phi Delta Kappa

Union of American Hebrew Congregations

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Our nation urgently needs a reaffirmation of our shared commitment, as American citizens, to the guiding principles of the Religious Liberty clauses of the First Amendment to the Constitution. The rights and responsibilities of the Religious Liberty clauses provide the civic framework within which we are able to debate our differences, to understand one another, and to forge public policies that serve the common good in public education.

Today, many American communities are divided over educational philosophy, school reform, and the role of religion and values in our public schools. Conflict and debate are vital to democracy. Yet, if controversies about public education are to advance the best interests of the nation, then *how* we debate, and not only *what* we debate, is critical.

In the spirit of the First Amendment, we propose the following principles as civic ground rules for addressing conflicts in public education:

I. Religious Liberty for All

Religious liberty is an inalienable right of every person.

As Americans, we all share the responsibility to guard that right for every citizen. The Constitution of the United States with its Bill of Rights provides a civic framework of rights and responsibilities that enables Americans to work together for the common good in public education.

II. The Meaning of Citizenship

Citizenship in a diverse society means living with our deepest differences and committing ourselves to work for public policies that are in the best interest of all individuals, families, communities and our nation.

The framers of our Constitution referred to this concept of moral responsibility as civic virtue.

III. Public Schools Belong to All Citizens

Public schools must model the democratic process and constitutional principles in the development of policies and curricula.

Policy decisions by officials or governing bodies should be made only after appropriate involvement of those affected by the decision and with due consideration for the rights of those holding dissenting views.

IV. Religious Liberty and Public Schools

Public schools may not inculcate nor inhibit religion. They must be places where religion and religious conviction are treated with fairness and respect.

Public schools uphold the First Amendment when they protect the religious liberty rights of students of all faiths or none. Schools demonstrate fairness when they ensure that the curriculum includes study *about* religion, where appropriate, as an important part of a complete education.

V. The Relationship between Parents and Schools

Parents are recognized as having the primary responsibility for the upbringing of their children, including education.

Parents who send their children to public schools delegate to public school educators some of the responsibility for their children's education. In so doing, parents acknowledge the crucial role of educators without abdicating their parental duty. Parents may also choose not to send their children to public schools and have their children educated at home or in private schools. However, private citizens, including business leaders and others, also have the right to expect public education to give students tools for living in a productive democratic society. All citizens must have a shared commitment to offer students the best possible education. Parents have a special responsibility to participate in the activity of their children's schools. Children and schools benefit greatly when parents and educators work closely together to shape school policies and practices and to ensure that public education supports the societal values of their community without undermining family values and convictions.



VI. Conduct of Public Disputes

Civil debate, the cornerstone of a true democracy, is vital to the success of any effort to improve and reform America's public schools.

Personal attacks, name-calling, ridicule and similar tactics destroy the fabric of our society and undermine the educational mission of our schools. Even when our differences are deep, all parties engaged in public disputes should treat one another with civility and respect, and should strive to be accurate and fair. Through constructive dialogue we have much to learn from one another.

Conclusion

This Statement of Principles is not an attempt to ignore or minimize differences that are important and abiding, but rather a reaffirmation of what we share as American citizens across our differences. Democratic citizenship does not require a compromise of our deepest convictions.

We invite all men and women of good will to join us in affirming these principles and putting them into action. The time has come for us to work together for academic excellence, fairness and shared civic values in our nation's schools.



Endnote

In 1994, Charles Haynes of the First Amendment Center and Ron Brandt of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) convened leaders from education associations, civil liberties groups, and religious organizations to draft these shared principles for addressing conflicts in public education. The agreement was published in 1995.

