FORUM V
Religion in Public Schools: Conflict or Opportunity? A Human Relations Workshop for Public School Administrators and Professionals

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Congress shall make no laws respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof . . .
—First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

Is the wall of separation between church and state crumbling, or is it simply cracked? Recent court decisions suggest that the question has still not been answered, and the debate over the First Amendment continues. Will the "establishment clause" or the "free exercise clause" be the winner?

For the Jewish community, one of the primary battlegrounds on which the separation of church and state is being fought is the public schools. A review of the Fall 1991 *ADL Law Report* finds that litigation is currently pending on such issues as religious displays, student religious meetings, prayer at graduation ceremonies, Bible classes and distribution of Bibles, teachers silently reading and displaying Christian materials in class, and holding public school classes in a church parish center (see the Suggested Readings list for other references on this subject).

Prayer in the public school has come to be "a symbolic rallying cry for worry about the family and its effect on the nation" (Cochran, 1991). Those who share concerns about family values in the context of fundamental religious beliefs have demonstrated deep passion in their efforts to put religion and religious values in the public schools.

Church-state separatists see a danger in such activities for they can easily lead to government-sponsored religious events and excessive entanglement between public agencies or schools and religion. Such entanglement is seen as a threat to the "establishment clause" of the First Amendment.

Jewish communal leaders and professionals recognize that if these religious passions, as acted out in public schools, are not resisted, they in effect will be encouraged. A lack of adequate professional response will support the recent trend of the erosion of church-state separation, as seen in the Supreme Court's landmark eight-one ruling that upheld the 1984 Equal Access Act that allows student religious groups to meet in public schools.

A review of the literature and recent court decisions suggests that Jewish community relations professionals must reexamine their approaches to action and education on the issue of church-state separation. A more pragmatic approach is necessary. In-service training of public school administrators and teachers, as described in detail in this article, is one example of such an approach. An opportunity exists for Jewish communal professionals to develop programs to prepare public school educators to address these complicated and often controversial issues before they are faced with a crisis in their own schools.

HUMAN RELATIONS WORKSHOP

Rationale

Public school students and their parents and employees of public schools have reported a wide range of problems that are perceived by those affected as insensitive infringements on their religious rights and the constitutional guarantees of separation of church and state. In some cases, the

victims feel that they have encountered overt anti-Semitism.

When investigated by community relations organizations, most of the reported incidents have been found to be caused by a lack of training, official guidelines, thoughtful planning, or basic understanding of issues relating to religious minorities. Seldom do the school officials or individual educators involved intend to hurt the affected students, parents, or employees. Therefore, public schools need to provide continuing education, workshops, and/or seminars to sensitize their professional staffs to the problems faced by religious minorities. The human relations workshop described in this article has been implemented within several public school systems, individual schools, and regional administrative groupings in several Southern states. This same workshop can be an effective tool for use in other regions of the United States.

Facilitator

It is essential that the individual who conducts the workshop be knowledgeable about Judaism and the Jewish people, culture, and religion. The facilitator must be sensitive to, as well as knowledgeable of, the multi-ethnic nature and diversity of observance, theology, and expression within the Jewish community. In addition, this individual should be well versed in matters relating to constitutional law, church-state issues, major court decisions, and the U.S. Supreme Court three-part test (see below). The facilitator must also have good teaching and group facilitation skills. Either a community relations/human relations professional or knowledgeable lay leader could serve as the facilitator.

"Nuts and Bolts" of the Workshop

The only materials that are needed to conduct the workshop are a blackboard and/or flip chart with chalk and/or markers. Handouts can be duplicated in advance for distribution at the workshop. Sample scenarios must also be prepared in advance of the workshop and distributed at the appropriate time.

Although the workshop can handle larger groups, it is advisable to limit the size to no more than 50 participants. The room needs to be set up so that everyone can see the facilitator and blackboard or flip chart, as well as each other. A part of the workshop is devoted to breakout groups. It is advisable to have tables around which groups of five to eight people can be seated during the breakout (preferably all in one room).

The workshop requires a minimum of 2½ hours. With groups of 50 or more, additional time will be needed to allow for adequate time for problem solving and feedback from each breakout group.

Introduction of Facilitator

The facilitator should be introduced by name only. His or her organizational affiliation, professional credentials, or other background information should not be shared until the end of the workshop or during the second half of the program. The purpose of this limited introduction is to remove any type of stereotype or bias the participants may have if they hear that the facilitator is of a particular religious background or works for an organization, company, or employer known by them.

Phase I of the Workshop

Immediately after an introduction by the host group leader, the facilitator begins with a statement similar to the following:

> One of the very basic principles of public education is to provide access to quality education to *all* students in a community. It is intended that students will come from diverse geographic, economic, and ethnic groups with varied religious and racial backgrounds. A successful public educational program helps all of its students learn in an accepting, comfortable, safe, and productive environment. The challenge to educators is to how best provide quality programs for

such a diverse population. Religious minorities in schools are among groups that create unique challenges for public school educators. Teachers or administrators can often find themselves accused of doing too much or not enough in support of one group or another.

Today, we are going to talk about religious minorities in public schools and how you can turn potential conflicts into opportunities for learning. First, however, let's take a few moments ourselves to explore the subject. There are many different religious minority groups in our community that we could use as examples, such as Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Independent Evangelical Baptists, etc. Today, however, we will use Jews as our example.

The facilitator immediately goes to the blackboard or flip chart and says, "Today we are going to talk about Jews." He or she then requests that the participants complete the phrase—"Jews are . . . "—with one or two-word adjectives or phrases. Participants are encouraged to say anything that comes to mind. Such adjectives as "religious," "smart," "family-oriented," "wealthy," and "traditional" are often mentioned in this brainstorming exercise. Although some eyebrow-raising statements may be made, it is important that the facilitator continue without interruption, comment, or any sign of shock or concern.

Once the facilitator has elicited from the group as many words or phrases as possible (within a reasonable amount of time), he or she introduces a new statement for response: "Jews believe . . ." Again, the facilitator solicits and writes down on the board or flip chart words or phrases without comment until everyone has had an opportunity to add to the list. Throughout the process, the facilitator or another individual writes out all of the words and posts them so that all are able to see the complete brainstorming list.

Finally, the facilitator submits for response the statement—"Jews look like . . ."—and follows the same process. After all three statements have been used and input from the group is exhausted, the facilitator proceeds by making certain observations, such as the following:

Obviously, many of the words that are on the board are generalizations that would not apply to all Jews. It is also interesting to note that some of these inaccurate generalizations are positive as well as negative. A statement such as "Jews are influential" is a positive statement even though it can have a negative consequence when it is applied as a prejudicial stereotype. Inaccurate stereotypes, whether positive or negative, can be hurtful even when not intended to be. Often, we hold these stereotypes based on lack of knowledge, contact, experience, or education. For example, Polish humor has resulted in significant negative and harmful stereotypes that can be very damaging to individual self-identity and general intergroup relations. Are there any words or phrases on the board/sheets that we could all agree are statements that can be applied in general to Jews?

The facilitator then eliminates or focuses on different words as discussed by the group. A statement, such as "Jews believe in one God," can be identified as an accurate generalization. In contrast, a statement, such as "Jews are religious, traditional, or all look a certain way," is obviously not accurate as applied to all Jews. During this part of the discussion, the facilitator can point out the diverse background of Jews based on their racial origin, ethnicity, and level of religious observance. The facilitator should also note that similar differences and diversity exist in all religious communities. All Baptists are not any more alike than are all Episcopalians.

Upon completion of this part of the workshop, the facilitator (time permitting) can take time to answer questions about Jews and Judaism in general. This part of the workshop should not take more than half the time allotted for the entire workshop.

Supplemental Brainstorming

If the above process is completed and there is still time left (less than half of the allotted time has been used), the facilitator can add the following statements for brainstorming response:

"Call out to me the names of Jewish foods."

Typical responses are such foods as bagels, lox, gefilte fish, chopped liver, corned beef, and chicken soup. Once the feedback from the group is exhausted, the facilitator can give a lesson on the difference between ethnic and religious foods. Most Jews who came to the United States were originally from Eastern Europe and brought the food and culture of those native lands to the United States. A Jew from Latin America or from North Africa would have a different food, culture, and diet than that described by the group. The only typically Jewish foods are such foods as matzah or hamantaschen, which are used to celebrate holidays. Cholent is also acceptable as a Jewish food since it is associated with cooking based on Sabbath observance.

The facilitator can also ask the group to give names of Jewish stores or businesses. If they do not know of Jewish stores in their own community, they can mention stores with which they are familiar in other communities. Usually, the group is able to offer several businesses with names that they associate as being Jewish. After the list is exhausted, the facilitator can then ask the group to name Episcopal or Methodist stores or businesses. The noticeable lack of response makes the point without much comment: Why do we tend to identify stores based on people of the Jewish religion yet we do not think of such in terms of other religions?"

Phase II of the Workshop

The facilitator notes that the workshop will now address what administrators and school officials need to know in order to handle sensitive issues and determine what is appropriate or inappropriate, legal or illegal.

The facilitator should ask someone in the group to share with others the First Amendment. If no one knows it by heart, the facilitator should read it: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The facilitator should then explain the two parts of the First Amendment and expound on what the establishment and free exercise clauses mean.

The facilitator should then acknowledge that issues of church-state separation are very difficult to assess. In response to these problems, which have existed for many years, the U.S. Supreme Court has developed a three-part test to determine whether any particular government or public school activity is appropriate or inappropriate based on the First Amendment.

1. The program or activity must have a secular purpose.
2. The program or activity must have an effect that neither advances nor inhibits religion.
3. The program or activity must avoid excessive government and/or school entanglement with religion.

The facilitator can give examples of what is meant by each of the three parts. A handout including the wording of the First Amendment and the three-part test should be given to participants.

A Comment on Religion in the Classroom

Religion has played a significant role in history and in the development of art, culture, philosophy, and the like. To learn about these subjects without a proper understanding of the impact of religion would be poor education. Teaching "about" religion is not only permissible, but necessary. However, problems arise when there is teaching "of" religion in public schools. Schools should avoid religious observances, devotions, or celebrations. Students, teachers or staff should never be put in positions where their own religious beliefs or practices are being questioned, infringed upon, or compromised by programs taking place in and sponsored by the public schools.

Practical Application:
Problem Solving in Schools

At this point in the workshop, participants do practical problem solving. The facilitator divides the larger group into subgroups of five to seven people, each of which is assigned to sit at a different table and to discuss a different sample problem. Each group designates one person to report to the larger group after 15 or 20 minutes of discussion.

Before the workshop, based on community experience or discussions with the sponsoring school group, the facilitator should develop sample scenarios that reflect problematic real-life situations that have occurred in that community. The following scenarios were used in a school district in Virginia.

1. The following are four different situations involving prayer in school. What is appropriate or inappropriate? If any of the activities are inappropriate, under what circumstances might they be appropriate? Are there any activities described that are totally inappropriate at any time in public schools?
   A. The theater group is at its final dress rehearsal before the school play. The drama teacher and director, Mrs. Jones, announces that the assistant principal has invited the cast and crew to join him in the next room for a prayer session before concluding the dress rehearsal. She assures everyone that participation is voluntary.
   B. It is the beginning of the school day. Mrs. Smith, a homeroom teacher, leads the class in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag and asks that the students bow their heads at the conclusion of the Pledge for a moment of silent thought, meditation, or prayer.
   C. It is lunch time. Mrs. Doe is sitting in the cafeteria. She asks the students to be quiet for a moment so that those who want to can say a prayer before the meal or join her in prayer.
   D. Mrs. Brown has joined a group of students in the school cafeteria, and upon sitting down, she bows her head and silently expresses grace before her meal.
2. Mr. Jones, a science teacher, wants to take his class on a field trip to learn more about how radio transmissions are created and broadcast. There are three radio broadcast studios within an hour's drive of the school. The closest, best-equipped, and most receptive to tours is the Independent Church, which has sophisticated equipment and professionals daily broadcasting religious programming. Is there a reason why Mr. Jones should not take his class to the church broadcasting studio? What are the pros and cons?
3. Jefferson Elementary School has a long tradition of honoring its students with perfect attendance. Should a student who has perfect attendance with the exception of two days missed due to religious holiday observances be considered for the attendance award?
4. A local church youth group leader has many of his congregants and club participants as students in your school. He wants to have permission to join his students in the cafeteria during their lunch time. He is an excellent professional and is willing to provide school-wide programming in addition to his informal contacts with his own group. His specialty and success have come in education against substance abuse. Should he be allowed to participate in the school? If so, should any restrictions be placed on his activities?
5. Your choral group, which includes students of many different religions, wants to have a Christmas concert, at which time they plan to present songs of religious content, including gospel, sacred,

Chanukah, and seasonal selections. An atheist student challenges the appropriateness of the school sponsoring such a "religious activity" and the fact that his class is expected to attend the presentation during school hours. What should be your position and that of the school regarding such programs? What should be your response to the student?

6. You receive a letter at school from your U.S. Senator requesting your participation at a prayer breakfast with an additional request that you encourage students from your school to also attend. What should you do?
7. Your PTA president is new to the school system and recommends that the school sponsor a baccalaureate service/program for the senior class each year. She suggests that clergy (on a rotating basis) be brought in to lead the service at the school or that different churches be used for the program. Should the school sponsor a baccalaureate program/service? If so, under what circumstances? If not, what reasons would you give the PTA president?

Each group is given a scenario and as much as 20 minutes to decide whether the situation discussed is appropriate or inappropriate and how they would handle it if it occurred in their own school. They are also asked if there are any variables that would permit the activity to be held, even if it is inappropriate as presented in its current form.

The facilitator circulates among the groups and listens to positions expressed in each. At the end of the 20 minutes, the facilitator asks each group to share with the other participants their scenario and their conclusions. Questions and/or discussion of each scenario can take place depending on time constraints. After all of the groups have presented their scenarios and conclusions, agreement should be sought as to what is appropriate and inappropriate based on the examples presented. Time permitting, a more extensive discussion around problem solving of other issues can take place.

At this point in the workshop, participants can share actual experiences they have had or are currently experiencing that they would like to receive feedback about from the rest of the group and the facilitator.

Conclusion of the Workshop

The facilitator should emphasize to the participants that in the real world there will be pressures and constraints no matter what decisions are made. However, there are guidelines to use in decision making. First and foremost, educators must look at what is educationally sound and appropriate for public school education. Second, administrators and educators must attempt to be sensitive to community diversity. Finally, school administrators and educators should refer to the three-part test to give some guidance as to direction or questionable activities. The facilitator might note that some school districts have found written guidelines to be helpful and that such workshops as these may be necessary on a periodic basis due to staff turnover and/or changing circumstances. Again, it should be noted that, although the examples given in this particular workshop focus on Jewish concerns, the educators are just as likely to have to deal with issues raised by Seventh Day Adventists (Saturday scheduling of activities in conflict with Sabbath), Jehovah's Witnesses (prohibition of the Pledge of Allegiance to Flag), atheists, and many other groups based on dress requirements, dietary laws, holiday observances, dancing, and the like.

In conclusion, the facilitator should note that the community relations group that sponsored the workshop is available throughout the year for assistance and that there are sample guidelines and explanations of court cases available for those who want to explore the subject in more depth. Handouts from the local Jewish community

relations council, and national defense organizations should be distributed.

Follow-Up

It is important that the facilitator and the sponsoring group obtain feedback from the school system or individual school that hosted the workshop so that communication can continue throughout the year. Each year, a 5-year calendar should be distributed outlining all of the Jewish holidays, noting that they begin the night before, and emphasizing those days on which students and employees may be absent from school. At least once a year there should be a meeting with school administrators to talk in general about religious issues and whether there is any additional support that the Jewish community relations council can give to foster increased sensitivity in the schools. Special attention should be given by Jewish community relations councils to such employment issues as absences for religious holidays, Saturday make-up days for snow and/or workshops, and scheduling of major school events on Jewish holidays.

The sponsoring community relations group should make notes on each workshop and explore trends over time in the reactions and input from participants. Notation should also be made of improvements in sensitivity shown following these workshops in those schools or systems that took part as compared to those that did not.

Evaluation

The workshop has been conducted in four different school districts for administrators and in six individual schools for teachers and principals. Feedback and evaluation from participants in the workshop have indicated the following:

- Participants responded that the sessions were productive, enjoyable, practical, and highly informative.
- There was a decrease in the number of complaints received by the local Jewish community relations councils in those communities where administrators and/or teachers participated in the workshops.
- Problems, however, were not eliminated, although the most serious and controversial concerns were handled much better by participating administrators and teachers than by those who had not participated. However, when problems occurred, especially related to winter "holiday" decorations, music at assemblies, and festivities, there was a reluctance by many (including participants) to take as consistent a position or stand as would have been desired.
- Parents reported a greater sensitivity on the part of participating administrators and teachers to issues of religion in public schools, as compared to nonparticipants.
- Superintendents reported high satisfaction with the workshop and a greater comfort level with the subject. In several districts, new guidelines were developed or old ones revised. Several reported that the workshop was helpful to them when they consulted with community groups, their own school boards, and with their school board attorneys.
- One of the most significant problems identified is that of staff turnover. The number of staff changes in a given district or school (teachers and principals) warrants a need to repeat the workshop every 2 to 3 years.

CONCLUDING NOTE

Although this author takes pride in the development of this workshop, its success will depend completely on others taking it, adapting it, making it their own, and sharing in its success.

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