

Education

School's still out, but debate lingers

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — While U.S. school children have been enjoying their summer vacation, political developments in the adult world could affect their religious access in public schools this fall or in years to come.

Leading the list of events that will likely have immediate impact was a memorandum from President Clinton, spelling out existing rights of religious access in public schools and urging that school officials across the country learn and implement them.

On a broader front of religion and public life, a variety of religious organizations have expressed support for a Religious Equality Amendment, a proposal of the politically conservative Christian Coalition's "Contract with the American Family."

This summer the pros and cons of such an amendment were debated at a series of regional hearings conducted around the country by the U.S. House of Representatives Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, chaired by Republican Charles T. Canady of Florida.

Among goals of the amendment's backers is a reversal of what they view as a prevailing secularist ideology in public education.

In testimony at one of the subcommittee hearings July 10, Cardinal John J. O'Connor of New York did not endorse a new constitutional amendment.

But he said "something has to be done" because in recent years the Constitution's princi-

ples of freedom of religion have been thrown "out of whack." The First Amendment's "no establishment" clause has been emphasized at the expense of its "free exercise" clause, he said.

Among issues of concern that Cardinal O'Connor cited was the "purely secularistic orientation" of public schools.

He also cited a wide range of other issues, among them government efforts to force religious social service agencies that use government funds to comply with rules requiring abortion counseling or hiring of homosexuals.

Clinton's memorandum on religion in schools was published in *The New York Times* July 13 after the president gave a speech in which he opposed a strictly secularist interpretation of the First Amendment, saying it "does not convert our (public) schools into religion-free zones."

The Constitution "permits and protects a greater degree of religious expression in public schools than many Americans now understand," Clinton said in the memo, addressed to Attorney General Janet Reno and Education Secretary Richard W. Riley.

He directed Riley, in consultation with Reno, to issue guidelines to all 15,000 U.S. public school districts clarifying when prayer and other forms of religious activity or expression are permissible in public schools.

Among rights of religious access he cited in the memo were:

Rights to group prayer or religious discussion, outside instruction or school-sponsored activities, under the same rules that are applied to other student activities and speech.

Use of facilities before or

after school for events with religious content, on the same basis as the facilities are made available for other events.

Access to school media, such as posting meeting notices on bulletin boards, on "the same terms as other noncurriculum-related student groups are allowed to use the school media."

Clinton said it is permissible for public schools to teach about religion and the role and influence of religion in history and culture as part of the curriculum.

He said students must be allowed to wear religiously prescribed articles of clothing, such as yarmulkes and head scarves. Display of religious messages on students' clothing should be governed by the same norms as display of nonreligious messages, he said.

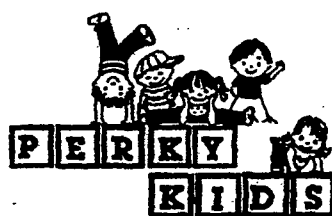
He asked the education secretary to spell out public law and policy in a number of other areas, such as religious expression in student assignments, religiously excused school absences, use of release time from school for off-premise religious education, and the teaching of "civic values and virtue and the moral code that holds us together as a community."

Bishop Donald W. Wuerl of Pittsburgh — who in early July sharply criticized the secular mentality that would exclude anything religious from public schools — praised the Clinton memo as a contribution to the debate.

"I welcome the public discussion at the highest levels of government and throughout society that President Clinton's memorandum regarding religious express in public schools will occasion," Bishop Wuerl told Catholic News Service.

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SCHOOL'S IN SESSION

Students of all ages will soon be returning to school. For some, this may be the first time they will be waiting for buses or walking to school while returning students may have forgotten the need to watch for traffic. Exercise extreme caution and watch for students going to or coming home from school.

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