

Guidelines

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"Now there is a middle ground on which all of us can agree," he said.

That middle ground lies in the notion that students — not school administrators or outside special-interest groups — should determine the type and amount of religious expression that takes place in public schools, according to such observers as J. Brent Walker, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee in Washington, D.C.

In a phone interview with the *Catholic Courier*, Walker explained that the new guidelines are designed to inform school administrators and students of their religious rights and civic responsibilities in a pluralistic society.

He added that the guidelines are based on a document drawn up by his organization working with other religious and civil-liberties groups on both the left and right sides of the issue.

Titled "Religion in the Public Schools: A Joint Statement of Current Law," the document summarizes the law's application to various forms of religious expression in the nation's public schools. Issued in April of this year, the document contains 18 sections covering such areas as student dress, teaching values, religious holidays and teaching about religion. Many of the sections find parallels in similar sections of the new federal guidelines.

Walker noted that the joint statement represents a consensus among various factions interested in the debate about the law and religious expression in public schools. He stressed, however, that the joint statement is not a common agenda, but rather a shared perception of the legal boundaries of the current debate. In fact, Walker continued, some of the groups contributing to the joint statement disagree sharply over how far the government should go in allowing religious expression in a publicly funded setting.

For example, while some groups contributing to the statement firmly support keeping a legal wall of separation between church and state, other contributors to the statement support the Religious Equality Amendment, a proposed amendment to the U.S. constitution, Walker said.

The amendment states, in part that "Nothing in the Constitution shall be construed to forbid the United States or any State to give public or ceremonial accommodation to the religious heritage, beliefs, or traditions of its people."

One such supporter of the amend-



ment is the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights. League officials told the *Courier* that they welcome the federal government's new guidelines, but still feel the REA is necessary.

"The Religious Equality Amendment is long overdue," noted Dr. William A. Donohue, league president, in a statement sent by fax to the *Courier*.

"An expansionist and wholly unprincipled interpretation of the so-called Establishment Clause of the First Amendment has relegated religious speech to a second-class status, the effect of which has been to intimidate Americans from fully exercising their right to religious liberty," the statement continued. "When students are told that their voluntary statements are impermissible at a school function, and when their football coaches are told that they cannot have a short, non-sectarian prayer in a huddle, there is something terribly wrong with the way the First Amendment is interpreted."

But some people believe that even such activities as prayer in a huddle can constitute psychological coercion of non-believers in a public-school setting. Teenagers often engage in activities against their will simply to gain peer ap-

proval, noted Judith Knight, executive director of the Genesee Valley Chapter of the New York Civil Liberties Union, an ACLU affiliate.

Knight stressed that her organization fully supports students' rights to religious expression, although it has long opposed any government- or school-mandated religious activity.

She added that the ACLU also endorses educating public school students about religion and its role in history, art,

music and other areas. Knight pointed out, for example, that she herself once taught the Bible as literature in a non-sectarian elective course offered to public high school seniors from many faith traditions. However, Knight said she feared some public-school administrators might see the new federal guidelines on student religious expression as a green light to begin pushing their own religious agendas.

Supporters of the new guidelines acknowledge that some school officials may ignore the government's strict directives forbidding any school-sponsored religious activity. Yet the guidelines' supporters point out that some school officials veered too far in the other direction for years, unduly restricting student religious activity that was perfectly legal.

Until this debate is resolved — if that ever occurs — Riley said he hopes the new guidelines will at least make life easier for the nation's school leaders.

"When it gets to the local community level, the school board can point to the (guidelines) as coming from the president and having the support of all these religious groups," he said. "It will have an impact in lessening litigation."

Riley said the staff of the Education Department's general counsel will handle inquiries related to the guidelines. But he said he sees the agency pointing schools in the direction of settling disputes themselves, rather than having his office arbitrate them.

A week after the guidelines were released, Riley said he had heard mostly positive reactions. Those complaints received were about equally divided on whether the guidelines are too permissive or too restrictive, he said.

"That is an indication that perhaps we are on common ground," he concluded.

This story contains reporting by Catholic News Service.

Southern Tier Hospice seeks volunteers and donations

ELMIRA — Southern Tier Hospice is offering training sessions for volunteers to assist terminally ill patients and their caregivers in Steuben, Chemung and Schuyler counties.

Volunteers must be at least 18, provide their own transportation, and not recently have suffered the loss of a loved one.

Training sessions begin Sept. 19 at St. James Mercy Health in Hornell (Sept. 8 registration deadline) and Oct. 3 at Southern Tier Hospice in Elmira (Sept. 22 registration deadline). Call 607/734-1570.

The hospice also recently began its 1995 fundraising campaign, "Friends of Hospice." Donations may be mailed to the hospice at 244 W. Water St., Elmira, N.Y., 14901.

Reality Cup deadline nears

ROCHESTER — The Reality Cup Committee has set a Sept. 22 deadline for entries to its Corporate Citizenship Essay Contest.

Rochester-area corporations are encouraged to submit essays describing their contributions to solving community problems. Essays must be no longer than 500 words and typed on white paper.

Essays will be judged by the Reality Cup Committee. The chief executive officer of the winning corporation will receive a plaque, prize, tour of Rochester neighborhoods and lunch at the House of Mercy, 725 Hudson Ave.

Entries must be sent to the Reality Cup Hospitality Center, 725 Hudson Ave., Rochester, N.Y. 14621. They must be postmarked by Sept. 22.

☆☆ Coming Attractions ☆☆

from the *Catholic Courier*

Fall Bridal Supplement

Publication Date: Sept. 21

Advertising Deadline: Sept. 7

The Catholic churches in the Rochester diocese host more than 3,000 marriages each year. This fall you can reach couples to be married — and their families and friends who will be involved in many aspects of the wedding — through this special supplement.



Each week the *Catholic Courier* is delivered to more than 50,000 homes throughout the 12-county Diocese of Rochester. When you advertise in the *Courier*, you will introduce your organization to more than 85,000 readers.

For more information or to place your ad, call your sales representative or the *Courier's* advertising department at 716-328-4340.

To Life!

Publication Date: Sept. 28

Advertising Deadline: Sept. 14

The Consistent Life Ethic, which promotes the dignity of all human life from conception until natural death, emerged as the second most important diocesan priority. This special section, which proceeds Respect Life Month, will emphasize protecting and nurturing life.



Fall Home Improvement

Publication Date: Oct. 5

Advertising Deadline: Sept. 21

This fix-up, paint-up, clean-up supplement will provide practical, roll-up-your-sleeves suggestions while commenting on the spiritual dimension of such home-based activities as stewardship of resources, recycling, building and appreciating the natural world around us.



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