

# Catholic Courier

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## Public schools, private beliefs

Peter Craig wanted to know why "everybody is afraid of Christmas."

That may seem a strange question, but Craig felt obliged to pose it in light of last year's controversy at Park Road Elementary School, a Pittsford Central School District facility where his son is now a fourth-grader.

Last year around this time, the public school became embroiled in controversy when the school's officials ordered the removal of decorated evergreen trees from its lobby after some parents and staff members complained about their religious symbolism.

"I was just kind of flabbergasted," Craig recalled of how he reacted when he learned the trees had been removed. "Christmas has been celebrated for a couple of thousand years, and you should not be afraid of it."

Craig, a parishioner at St. Louis Church in Pittsford, said he feels Christians are singled out whenever their religious beliefs are expressed in a public-school setting.

"It seems like, to me, for whatever reason, Christian and Catholic beliefs are shoved to the background whenever anybody is offended," he said.

#### FINE LINE

Like Craig, Pittsford Central School District Superintendent Mary Alice Price is Catholic. She noted that the Park Road controversy engendered fierce parental criticism of the district, and that she understood why the removal of the trees stirred such passions. But public schools are open to children of all faiths, she said, and must walk a fine line between teaching about



The chalkboard in Adam Gursllin's art classroom at Pittsford's Thornell Road Elementary School displays students' ideas about the month of December.

faiths appropriately and inappropriately.

"The expectation is that we help students learn about diversity and different spiritual systems," she said. "But the line for us is whether or not you're promoting a particular religion."

The Park Road controversy resulted in a soul-searching series of actions by the district, which appointed a task force and a steering committee to discuss revising the district's "Religion and the School" policy. In doing so, the district surveyed 12,000 school-family households about the issue; consulted other school districts around the country as well as a First Amendment ex-

pert; and held focus-group discussions with teachers, staff and parents, including Craig.

The revised policy was released in October, and is broader and more flexible than the district's previous policy, Price said. Under the old policy, for example, schools would place the religious symbols of different faiths together in a display to avoid offending anyone, she noted. Now, however, schools can choose to focus for a time on a particular religion in its displays, so long as the displays are seasonally appropriate and serve an educational purpose, she said.

"The use of representative symbols in classroom or building displays is a welcome prac-

tice and should be viewed as another way to educate our children," Price said in a public statement accompanying release of the new policy. "For example, a school could develop a quarterly or monthly building display educating students about religious, cultural and civic celebrations."

The policy spells out "appropriate" and "inappropriate" religious expression by teachers and students in Pittsford schools. Students may form religious clubs, for example, but teachers cannot participate in club activities. Teachers may talk about a particular religion's holidays in the context of a lesson, but

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