

# PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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may not celebrate any religion's holidays in the classroom.

Kathi Sigler is a parishioner at Pittsford's Church of the Transfiguration and also president of the Pittsford Central Board of Education. She praised the new policy for being specific about how schools should handle religion. The new policy gives a list of particulars to which schools can refer for guidance, she said, adding that it will take at least a year for district schools to fully implement the policy.

"It might take some time to become better at this than we have in the past couple of years," she said.

She added that reactions to the policy have been mixed.

"There is no consensus among our population," she said. "Some people feel it's too restrictive; some people feel that it was unnecessary to begin with; some feel it's something that's inappropriate for the district to deal with. However, most people are grateful that the district administration addressed the issue in an effort to do better."

## RELIGIOUS RIGHTS

Ever since the U.S. Supreme Court acted in 1963 to ban mandated prayer in public schools, public districts have struggled to cope with the role of religion on school grounds. Church-state experts from around the country noted that many educators have assumed since the 1960s that religion was prohibited in public schools, even though the Supreme Court decision did not actually say that.

"Everyone just heard 'no prayer in schools, no Bibles in schools, God has been kicked out of schools,'" said John Ferguson, an attorney with the First Amendment Center in Nashville, Tenn. "It created this misperception that religion is not al-



A first-grade student at Pittsford's Thornell Road Elementary School designs her own Christmas card during art class Friday, Dec. 5. Art teacher Adam Gurrslin said the student-created greeting cards address many different holidays and winter events, but all feature a December theme.

lowed in (public) schools."

Ferguson — who served as a consultant to Pittsford as the district drew up its new policy — added that during the 1970s and '80s, religion was downplayed in classrooms and even removed from history textbooks, despite the important role that religion played in the history of America. Fear of lawsuits drove many school districts to move away from allowing any kind of religious expression in schools, he said.

However, a consensus among conservative and liberal church-state experts has been slowly emerging in recent years over the proper role of religion in the classroom, Ferguson said. In light of that growing consensus, both the Clinton and Bush administrations released guidelines for public schools that encouraged the discussion of — as well as teaching about — religion in public schools, he and other experts noted.

Yet the clash between public-school duties and students' religious beliefs is still making headlines, according to Patrick Korten, vice president for communications at The

Becket Fund For Religious Liberty. Founded by Catholic Rochester native Kevin J. "Seamus" Hasson, the Washington, D.C.-based Becket Fund has litigated cases involving believers' rights in public schools.

The Becket Fund recently settled a case out-of-court on behalf of an Iroquois high-school student near Plattsburgh who had been denied the right to wear a religious headband in school. The school said the headband violated its "no bandanas" policy, and confined the student for 73 school days to a windowless room where he received no instruction. After the Becket Fund intervened, the student was allowed to wear his headband and received tutoring to help him make up missed work.

"The general principle, as we see it, is that religion is an essential part of the culture, and it is ludicrous for the government to pretend that it doesn't exist," Korten said. "Religion is ... something that never need be banished from public schools." Nonetheless, he said, fear created by the Supreme Court's 1963 ruling as well as "secularization" in the cul-

ture have combined to make public-school officials wary of and even hostile to religion.

Meanwhile, Americans United For Separation of Church and State, also based in Washington, D.C., takes a different view of the church-school debate. Robert Boston, an AU spokesman, noted that America is an increasingly diverse country with growing numbers of non-Christians who may be uncomfortable with religious displays of any kinds in public schools.

"It isn't just enough for a community to say (to non-Christians) 'Well, we've always done it this way, go away,'" Boston said.

He added that his group supports the use of explicitly religious symbols in public schools, including nativity scenes and crosses, as long as they serve an educational purpose. He also dismissed the concerns voiced by some Christians that they are being driven from the "public square" in favor of other groups. He noted that Christians have numerous opportunities, through the media, for example, to promote their views. Right-wing Christians, in particular, he said, interpret opposition to their contentions as an attempt to "shout them down," which is not the case.

"If you look at the public square honestly and at American culture honestly, it's hard to say that religion is not welcome," Boston added.

To forge a consensus on the role of religion in public schools, Ferguson advocated that school districts engage in open and public discussion with school parents about their religious policies. He noted that the vast majority of cases with which he's dealt stemmed not from antipathy toward religion but from school officials' lack of communication about religious policy to parents.

"I've yet to find the teacher or educator who wakes up in the morning saying, 'I'm trying to find a way to violate the students' rights,'" Ferguson said.

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