

Intersection of Church and State

How public schools are welcoming religious help, and why there hasn't been a lawsuit.

By Cynthia McCabe



It may be motivated by the Bible, and it may be about studying, but it's not Bible study. In pockets around the country, public schools are joining hands with an unlikely group—religious community members—to help students academically and socially. Take into account that, in at least one state, the group nurturing these partnerships is the educators' union, and you've got enough fodder for days of head scratching and quizzical looks.

For many, the rules have been rigid: religion doesn't make it past the schoolhouse door. But somewhere along the line, that turned into a fear of any communication between the two entities, even if it had nothing to do with religion. It is what Pastor Todd Littleton of Snow Hill Baptist Church in Tuttle, Oklahoma, calls an unnecessary polarization.

"Many educators are asking themselves how they can be more effective and widen their support network," says Littleton. But when it comes to religion and schools, "[only] the extreme cases get reported. Fear is our default. Who gets disadvantaged in that are the children."

In his state, there's movement to get beyond that atrophying fear, with the intent of chipping away at the achievement gaps and dropout rates. Church members around the city are linking up with students in school-sanctioned arrangements to provide tutoring and mentoring. And going on three years now, public school educators gather at an annual conference, organized by the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA), to talk about melding religious values and working with students.

"Our members have great faith in public education and are very active in their faith-based organizations," says Association President Becky Felts. And with increasing mandates and decreasing resources, schools must educate students under unprecedented conditions. They need help. "Where do you go for community support?" asks Felts. Because of the pre-existing relationship with students, parents, and educators, "the church family can be a natural place for many of them."

'WE'RE NOT THERE TO PRAY'

In Oklahoma City, police Sgt. Wayne Cubit once saw his department attending to the needs of students in a very different way than community churches. "We investigate, they pray," says Cubit of his former mindset. But after a spate of gang shootings in 2006 and 2007, area ministers and school administrators began calling police regularly wondering what could be done to prevent violence.

So Cubit began forming action teams comprising a police officer and one or two volunteers from local churches that work to keep students out of gangs. Under the "FACT" program, a teacher or administrator identifies a student who appears to be in a gang or on their way—but who is still malleable enough to be pulled back from the brink. They then call on Cubit to dispatch



Volunteers from local churches meet with students at Studio 222 after school.

Photo by Bryan Terry

the team to the student's house or to a local recreation center.

Although the group knocking on the door could be considered "Mod Squad meets God squad," the visit isn't about religion or the law.

"We're not there to pray," says Cubit. "We're not there to investigate a crime. We're there to service them." The ministers often help get a foot in the door of the home, as they're typically more familiar in the community. The police and ministers offer activities that are alternatives to gang life.

One such meeting revealed that a student—a fairly recent recruit to the Crips gang—really wanted to try out as a drum major at school but couldn't afford a whistle. So Cubit's team bought him one. Now Cubit picks the boy up from band practice after school, along with his own son, and drives him home. Because of how quickly and deeply a gang can get its hooks into a student, "We don't have a lot of success stories," he says of the action teams. "But we'll keep spending the time to find their gift."

THE ART OF CHURCH-SCHOOL TEAMWORK

Knowing that their help could prevent students from dropping out or push them to academic success is a powerful motivator for the parishioners at St. Luke's Methodist Church in downtown Oklahoma City.

At the church's "Studio 222," an after-school arts program for about two dozen nearby middle school students, artists work with the students four days a week. A roster of 75 volunteers takes turns picking the kids up from school in the church's vans, provides them with snacks, and assists in the afternoon's activities—everything from photography and computer animation to dance and leatherwork.

"Providing hope for these children's futures is part of the mission of our church," says program coordinator Julie Robinson, pointing out that participants grapple with learning disabilities, behavioral problems, poverty, and broken homes. "Jesus wants us to go out and serve people in need."

But that doesn't mean Jesus should come up in conversation instigated by a volunteer. Their orientation stresses this before they work with the students, says Robinson, adding, "Actions speak louder than words."

Their actions aided Kenneth, a severely introverted boy who rarely speaks. His work behind the viewfinder in the Studio 222 photography class "just brought him out" artistically, says Robinson. And when Kenneth called Robinson one weekend and asked if he could go to church with her, she obliged. Now he's a fairly regular attendee.

AN UNTAPPED MARKET



Police and a pastor meet with at-risk students in the FACT program.

Photo by Tim Cave

Church-school partnerships aren't just cropping up in Oklahoma, where organizers acknowledge that public opinion isn't too much of a problem; as Felts puts it, "Churches outnumber restaurants on street corners." Studio 222 and FACT are modeled on similar partnerships in Chicago and Boston.

Across the country though, educators are concerned about the legality and boundary lines in such arrangements, says Marcia Beauchamp, a First Amendment expert based in Santa Rosa, California. On the religious side,

it's about ensuring that they follow program guidelines while still maintaining their doctrinal ideals. On the school and parental side, it's about ensuring that faith-based groups aren't proselytizing. She advises educators and administrators to draft a religious liberty policy that guides any cooperative agreement(s) with a particular group.

At its annual Educator-Clergy Conference, OEA brings together experts like Beauchamp and educators like Monte Lawler, an elementary special education teacher who wants to start a summer reading program with help from local church youths. Lawler is pleased to see the Association recognize that her spiritual life is inextricably linked with her professional life. "It was refreshing to go to a conference that met both my loves together," she says. "I believe in public education, but I love my Savior."

Lawler, also a longtime activist for her local, sees another potential benefit to the Association in reaching out to religious educators: Increased union membership and support for the public schools from church-going parents. Too often she hears colleagues express coolness toward a union they perceive as being anti-religion, and sees parents enroll children in private schools believing that public schools are bastions of anti-religious sentiment.

To reach those groups, "We have to ask ourselves, 'what are we not doing?'" says Lawler. Church-school partnerships can show that "if you support your local public school, you're supporting your community—including the church community."

For Littleton, recruiting volunteers from his congregation to tutor students in reading, math, and writing has meant drawing from a pool of folks who haven't always viewed public schools with warmth. "Rather than sit on the sidelines and complain, we've tried to be a help," he says. "Not for the sake of gaining church members, but to try to help teachers."

ESP in the School Hall and the Church Hall

The same man who works in the classroom as a special education instructional assistant also stands at the pulpit on Sundays at two Arizona churches, preaching to his flock.

Joseph Howard's faith is an omnipresent influence on how he conducts himself, but it never explicitly manifests with his students. "When I'm in the classroom, my mind is on the classroom," he says.

Howard is one of many public school educators wearing two hats when it comes to academic and spiritual education, trading weekday work in schools for weekend work in religious communities. In addition to his education degree, Howard has a master's in Biblical studies and a doctorate in Christian education. A 22-year veteran of the classroom, he served as dean of a Bible institute and worked as a pastor in a correctional institute. He even has several books under his belt, including a novel released earlier this year about a pastor of an inner-city mega-church.



Photo by Olivia Womack

In Howard's case, his role as a strong union proponent guides him as well. A third-generation alumnus of the steel industry, he learned from his grandfather about the role unions played in protecting workers toiling under deadly conditions in the early 1900s.

He sees parallels among the union activist, the clergyman, and the educator: “There are generalizations that the union is out for itself; a few bad clergymen make it difficult for everyone; and for every good and dedicated educator, it only takes one bad one [to make the news],” he says. “But all of those jobs are ones that you take home with you. You work into the wee hours.”

The First Amendment Center’s Marcia Beauchamp has four commandments for navigating the waters of public school-church partnerships and much of it is based on a sound source—the U.S. Constitution:

- 1.** Schools have to be neutral with regard to religion so they can’t be in any kind of cooperative agreement that favors a particular religious group. In other words, you can’t grant the Methodists sole access to tutoring students because you like their choir the best.
- 2.** If students are meeting with church tutors in a church facility, organizers should ensure any room being used as a de facto classroom isn’t laden with religious references. A room with a small cross etched in a stained glass window is one thing. One with an entire wall mural depicting the crucifixion is another.
- 3.** No proselytizing by religious group volunteers! You can preach about not ending a sentence with a preposition, character education, or the Periodic Table. You cannot preach about Buddha, Elijah Muhammad, Jesus, or any other religious figure or movement.
- 4.** Students can’t be rewarded or penalized for participating or not in a particular activity with religious volunteers. If Erin goes to the nearby temple for after-school drawing class it shouldn’t impact her math grade unless she’s demonstrating better understanding of angles and lines.

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