



National Council of Churches

National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

The Churches and the Public Schools at the Close of the Twentieth Century

A Policy Statement of the National Council of the Churches of Christ
Adopted November 11, 1999

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The Churches and the Public Schools at the Close of the Twentieth Century

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Historic Support of the Member Communion for Public Schooling

Although many of the member denominations of the National Council of the Churches of Christ have issued statements supportive of public education, and although the NCC itself has made its pro-public schools stance clear for several decades, in recent years the voices of our churches have been largely absent from the ongoing debate about the meaning and future of our nation's schools.

As a result, public consciousness has been dominated by religious and political groups whose view of public schools is largely negative. Because we have been silent, many, even in our own communions, are ignorant of our historical ties to and support for public education. With this statement we propose to bring the voices of our member churches back into the present debate, bringing with us our traditional support for the strengthening and reform of the public schools. At a time when public education has become a political battleground, we call on our member churches and nation to remember first and foremost our children. The well being of children, all children, is our central concern.

While we acknowledge and affirm the contribution of private schools to the welfare of children and the nation, public schools are the primary route for most children—especially the children of poverty—into full participation in our economic, political, and community life. As a consequence, all of us, Christians and non-Christians alike, have a moral responsibility to support, strengthen and reform the public schools. They have been and continue to be both an avenue of opportunity and a major cohesive force in our society—a society becoming daily more diverse racially, culturally, and religiously.

We welcome the fact that many public schools now teach about our nation's diversity and the role of religion in human life and history, and applaud the schools' efforts to promote those virtues necessary for good citizenship in a pluralistic democracy. These reforms help to accommodate the constitutional rights of all students and their parents. Just as we encourage schools to ensure that all religions are treated with fairness and respect, so we urge parents and others to refrain from the temptation to use public schools to advance the cause of any one religion or ethnic tradition, whether through curriculum or through efforts to attach religious personnel to the public schools. We repeat our conviction that parents have the right to select home schooling or private or parochial schools for their children. But with that personal right comes the public obligation to support public schools for all children.

We acknowledge the debate among the members of our churches over whether public funds might appropriately be used to remedy the lingering effects of racial injustice in our nation's educational system. Some understandably feel that African-Americans and other racial minorities trapped by middle class flight in failing urban schools have little choice but to send their children to private schools, many of which are religiously affiliated. Without some public support, such a choice may be impossible for them.

Others maintain that such a use of public funds could lead to increased racial and socio-economic isolation and could impair efforts to improve urban schools without providing enhanced educational opportunities. We do not purport to resolve our differences over this issue, but we do affirm our conviction that, as a general rule, public funds should be used for public purposes. We also caution that government aid to primary and secondary religious schools raises constitutional problems, and could undermine the schools' independence and/or compromise their religious message. Believing that the First Amendment, along with the Equal Access Act, provides an adequate and sufficient guarantee of the religious liberty of students

and their parents, we oppose any efforts to alter the First Amendment's prohibition against laws respecting an establishment of religion.

Nothing is to be gained from blaming the victims of the current injustice when they seek more immediate solutions to the problems faced by their children and loved ones. Yet with our eyes focused by our faith on the needs of all children in our public schools, we call upon our members to direct their energies toward improving the schools that the majority of children will continue to attend. The long-range solution is to improve all schools so that families will not be forced to seek other educational alternatives.

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The Larger Social Context

We speak at a moment when many voices are questioning the very value of the public schools; indeed, one recent study has concluded that the American public is now "half way out the school house door." We are convinced that, should the public further weaken its support for the public schools, we would all suffer a devastating loss in the quality of public, economic, and spiritual life throughout our society. Tragically, those who would suffer most from this abandonment would, once again, be children.

Public schools have been a cornerstone of our democracy. What is not sufficiently known is that, historically, education, particularly the ability to read the Bible, has also been held to be essential to the development of religious faith. To that end, the great figures of the Reformation called for the establishment of schools. Our religious heritage should lead us to defend the public schools, and to rejoice that they now reflect the racial, ethnic, and religious diversity of our country better than they have ever done before.

Too often, criticism of the public schools fails to reflect our present societal complexity. At a moment when childhood poverty is shamefully widespread, when many families are under constant stress, when schools are often limited by lack of funds or resources, criticism of the public schools often ignores an essential truth: we cannot believe that we can improve public schools by concentrating on the schools alone. They alone can neither cause nor cure the problems we face. In this context, we must address with prayerful determination the issues of race and class, which threaten both public education and democracy in America.

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Public Funding Issues

Faced with all the problems of end-of-the-century America, it is noteworthy testimony to the commitment of educators and parents that the schools succeed as well as they do. No reforms

can be realized without widespread public support for public schools and a determined willingness to invest in children and their future. Therefore, it is imperative that our churches begin a serious effort to educate their members about our history in regard to education in general and public education in particular, and to turn the attention of their denominations to the plight of school children in this country.

By almost any standard of judgment, the schools our children attend can be described in contradictory terms: Some are academically excellent, some a virtual disgrace; some are oases of safety for their students, while others are dangerous to student and teacher alike; some teachers are exceptionally well qualified, others are assigned to areas in which they have little or no expertise; some school facilities are a fantasy land of modern technology, while others are so dilapidated that they themselves impede learning.

The wide disparities among public schools exist largely because schools reflect the affluence and/or the political power of the communities in which they are found. Within virtually every state there are school districts that lavish on their students three or four times the amount of money spent on other children in the same state. Most tellingly, the schools that offer the least to their students are often schools serving poor children, among whom children of color figure disproportionately, as they do in all the shortfalls of our common life. Indeed, the coexistence of neglect of schools and neglect of other aspects of the life of people who are poor makes it clear that no effort to improve education in the United States can ignore the realities of racial and class discrimination in our society as a whole.

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What Local Churches Can Do

Moved by our conviction that public schools benefit all the children in our society, and that they are a salient mark of our sense of ourselves as a part of God's diverse, multi-cultural and multi-racial family, we repeat the 1963 call of the National Council of the Churches of Christ for "efforts to strengthen and improve the American system of public education."

Local churches and all communities of faith must become better informed about the needs of the public schools in their communities and in the country as a whole. They can then counter the widespread misinformation now abroad, and work together to support and strengthen the schools. Without adequate information, we can not defend public education and the democratic heritage that it supports. Without full knowledge of our religious and democratic traditions we cannot ensure that those elected to school boards are strongly committed to both public education and religious liberty.

Churches can and should emphasize—through sermons, programs, and by example—the importance of education and of public schools. They can support education by:

- encouraging innovative and carefully monitored reform efforts in the public schools, paying particular attention to governance, funding, assessment, and selection of students;
- structuring class size to the best advantage of all children, paying particular attention to reducing class size in elementary grades;
- honoring teachers as role models for young people;
- emphasizing books and literacy; speaking out for the academic freedom of teachers and librarians; calling for the broad availability of all age-appropriate materials and books in public school libraries; and encouraging schools to include information which will broaden students' understanding of human life all over the world;
- initiating programs in cooperation with the public schools to provide after-school and vacation help, enrichment and adopt-a-school programs, and literacy and reading emphases;
- supporting free and open inquiry in science as well as all aspects of the curriculum;
- providing parenting classes to emphasize the special responsibilities of families to schools and school-aged children;
- encouraging the use of curricula in all schools that reflect the role of the many racial and ethnic groups in the history and culture of the United States;
- advocating for quality, age-appropriate Comprehensive Health Education in the public schools;
- advocating for the inclusion of differently-abled students in our classrooms, and ensuring that teachers have the special training needed to meet these children's needs;
- supporting thoughtful reform and innovation in local schools to improve teaching and learning at all levels; and by
- advocating at the state level for adequate school funding and equitable distribution of state funds and encouraging education about local funding ballot issues.

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Church Action on the National Level

Just as the nation has come together in the past to address situations deemed to be crises, so it must come together now in a national crusade to save the public schools and to bring to all children the abundant life which ought by rights be theirs as children of God. With the history of vocal support for public education which NCC communions share, they ought to be leaders in this crusade.

We therefore call upon the member denominations of the National Council of the Churches of Christ, working with others in communities of faith and concern, to:

- encourage local churches to form committees to learn about public school issues, to offer candidate forums during school board elections, and to educate their members about the historical role of churches in creating and supporting public schools;
- support programs to increase and equalize state and local funding and support, to end the present unjust educational disparities between rich and poor;
- insist upon excellence in teaching in the public schools by calling for strengthened teacher training in both church-related and public institutions, for enhanced professional development for teachers and administrators, and for policies which assign teachers only to disciplines in which they are fully prepared, to classes whose size encourages individualized assistance, and to schedules which give teachers time to prepare or consult with other teachers, students, and parents;
- support standards-based school reforms, working in districts and states until the country as a whole has reasonable and challenging standards by which to assess students and schools;
- encourage the development of smaller schools (including "schools within schools") to provide a caring environment;
- call upon the Congress to pass and fund fully legislation to repair and modernize school facilities and to create new facilities as needed; and
- advocate for universal, early, and quality preschool education for all children.

As Christians, we must make real our commitment to children and to the welfare of all our neighbors and our communities. Therefore, the churches of the National Council of the Churches of Christ state with renewed conviction their belief that "public education should have the full and conscientious support of Christians and Christian churches." We call on

communities of faith to bring their resources, public concern, and moral authority to support not only the public schools, but also the teachers, the administrators, and, most particularly, the children in those schools.

We have said repeatedly that we care about children and schools; now we must undergird our words with actions.

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