

A doctrine of education without indoctrination



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

It's a challenging time to be raising children. Education is under assault from several angles, kids are glued to their devices, parents are stressed. Could more religion help, or make the situation worse?

Some believe that more religion in public schools is the answer. Let's be honest. Do we hear Buddhists, Muslims, Jews and Hindus demanding more faith to be included in school lessons? No.

One loud and angry segment of believers has made it their mission to push their dogma into classrooms. They demand biblical commands be posted in classrooms and they call for prayers, Bible readings and "chaplains" in schools. Fearful of secular educational programs that welcome everyone regardless of beliefs, these folks fight for preference and privilege in the public square, including schools. And they have found ways of forcing the rest of us to fund their private religious schools through "school choice" vouchers.

Consider the accusation that children are being "indoctrinated." To "indoctrinate" is literally to "teach (a person or group) to accept a set of beliefs uncritically." The key word is "uncriti-

cally." It also refers to proselytizing (trying to convert to your beliefs) or re-educating (which can be a good thing). The fear is that young people are having their minds shaped by teachers who openly or secretly want to fill their heads with "secular culture." Most often these worries are based on issues of sexuality (there's a certain obsession with sex). And they don't want their children to hear things from teachers or classmates that might shake the beliefs taught at home and church. They discourage critical thinking.

One "defender of education" describes their work "to restore schools at all levels from activists imposing harmful agendas ... we fight indoctrination in classrooms and on campus to promote the reestablishment of a quality, non-political education for all students." They claim "your children" are being "bombarded with political bias, ideology and activism" so they work to "restore free exchange of ideas." They say "education should be about learning, not activism."

Look closer at these fear-based claims. Isn't this group engaged in "activism"? Don't they have an "ideology" and their own "political bias"? It sure looks that way.

As they see it, America is on fire, under attack from secular forces seeking to expose children to ... difference — different ideas, different beliefs, different people. "Diversity" in backgrounds, life

experience, beliefs and views frightens them. Their concerns should be heard, yet we wonder if they've ever sat down to listen to what teachers are actually doing and saying in the classroom. It appears they only want to agitate and propagate an agenda of fear. "They" are out to get our children and control their minds! Really? Though these alarmists shout their fear about "DEI," the fact is, a school district's policy to encourage diversity in teachers and students, welcoming people from all backgrounds and beliefs, only strengthens a community.

We should be supporting efforts to bring communities together through a wide, stimulating education for every student. This is an intelligent "ideology" based on a realistic understanding of a country learning from a variety of social and religious perspectives, as well as the good and bad of our past, in order to move forward with eyes and minds open.

Fortunately, there are many who are standing up, speaking out and pushing back on these forms of religious bullying. Americans United, Interfaith Alliance, Freedom from Religion Foundation, and other coalitions of concerned faithful and secular people, are challenging what feels like a takeover of schools welcoming to all children. Local parents' groups and legal organizations are resisting this activist agenda by supporting and defending the pluralis-

tic foundation of the country. These advocates for freedom, including religious freedom, aren't motivated by fear but a rational commitment to work together for the common good.

When my daughter was a child, I enrolled her in a school in our diverse neighborhood with a large immigrant community. She enjoyed classes with friends who were Black, Asian, Latino and white, like my daughter. School events included many languages. Various holidays were recognized presenting opportunities to learn about other cultural expressions. We always thought this environment reflected a wonderful, colorful America. Teachers invited parents to visit classrooms, to have conversations about lessons, inviting any questions a parent may have. If there was any "ideology," it was the guiding principle that a well-balanced education should welcome and celebrate difference.

There is a kind of religion, or belief, that might enhance education. It's the form of faith that chooses not to fill a child's mind with fear of "the other," not to imagine secular public education is the enemy, but a creative force for good. Reasonable people, religious or not, can help "re-educate" those who have been indoctrinated by uncritical doctrines of fear.

Chris Highland, a humanist teacher and writer, lives in Asheville, NC. See "Friendly Freethinker" (chighland.com)