

Speaking up for public schools: What churches can do

by [Oliver Thomas](#) in the [March 10, 1999](#) issue

The saints are in retreat. Faced by what they consider moral as well as academic breakdown, some evangelical leaders are calling on Christians to withdraw their children from public schools and place them in private religious academies--or better yet--teach them at home. "Exodus 2000," they call it. And for those who miss the exodus, they have a backup plan: "Rescue 2010."

One of the leaders of the dump-public-schools movement is Robert Simons, director of Citizens for Excellence in Education. In a recent fund-raising letter Simons says, "Our public school system unabashedly declares to our children, there is no such thing as right and wrong! There are no absolute standards. There is no God. . . . Our Christian children are falling like dominoes! The humanist manipulators are rejoicing with satanic glee."

With due respect to Simons, my experience with literally hundreds of public school districts convinces me that the teaching profession is blessed with a disproportionately large number of Christian teachers. Who else would want to take on such a demanding job for such meager pay?

School boards and administrators, for their part, seem to be bending over backwards to make sure that religion is treated with fairness and respect. I base this not on speculation but on personal observation as an active school board chairman in my home state of Tennessee and as an attorney who has worked with hundreds of school districts across the U.S.

No doubt there are school districts where the religious rights of students are denied and the role of religion and faith is ignored in the curriculum. With over 15,000 school districts nationwide, it's no surprise that some get it wrong. And remember, televangelists and politicians have been telling educators for decades that God has been *kicked out* of the public schools. Little wonder some teachers believe them.

Most schools, however, are struggling to get it right. They are using the new consensus guidelines distributed by President Clinton and endorsed by such diverse groups as the National Association of Evangelicals and People for the American Way. They have implemented equal access for student-initiated religious activity, and many have incorporated strong character education programs that reflect traditional values such as honesty, integrity, the work ethic and abstinence from drugs and premarital sex. In fact, I haven't been in a single district--from L.A. to Long Island--where schools are promoting atheism and moral anarchy. To the contrary, the majority of educators are fighting for the moral as well as academic lives of their students. In a time when parents practice drive-by divorce, Hollywood offers gratuitous sex and violence, and prominent preachers and politicians model greed, dishonesty and disrespect, most teachers are working overtime to sustain what is best understood as a countercultural movement.

But even if Simons's accusations were accurate, would that justify Christians abandoning the schools? Jesus, after all, showed extraordinary care and concern for children at a time when children were considered chattel property. Consider his chilling words for those who place stumbling blocks in the paths of children. "It would be better if a millstone were tied around your neck!" In modern society, to fail to provide a child with the best education available is to put an almost insurmountable stumbling block in that child's path.

Nor can we ignore Jesus' most sobering warning to his followers: "In so much as you do it not unto the least of these, you do it not unto me." Can there be any weaker, more vulnerable members of society than our children? Among those children, many who are hungry, ill-clad and underloved will be found in a public school.

The National Council of Churches is offering an alternative to Exodus 2000. At its annual meeting last November, the NCC passed a policy statement titled "The Churches and the Public Schools at the Close of the 21st Century." Instead of withdrawing in the face of increasing problems, the NCC is calling on Christians to get involved.

First, the statement calls on churches to create partnerships with neighborhood schools. Tutoring, literacy programs, after-school programs for latchkey kids--these are just a few of the ways local congregations can help. There are 231,000 parishes represented by the NCC's 35 member communions. There are only 87,000 public schools. That's almost three churches and hundreds of active Christians for each

school in America. The NCC's solution is simple: Ask a local principal how you can help, and get involved today.

Second, the statement spotlights the inequities in school funding and demands change. Philadelphia, for example, annually receives \$1,500 less per student than the surrounding 61 Pennsylvania school districts. Yet Philadelphia has the greatest number of students living in poverty, as well as the largest number of Latino and African-American students. Such gross disparities in funding have caused Philadelphia school superintendent David Hornbeck to describe schools as "the next great civil rights battlefield." Like the NCC, Hornbeck calls on the churches to put their moral and political clout behind public schools. "Whether we have children in the schools or not," Hornbeck says, "all have a responsibility. We need to say, 'Here I am, Lord. Send me!'"

Finally, the NCC has made a strong statement against the siren song of tuition vouchers as a cure-all for the ills of failing schools. Though respectfully acknowledging the debate among the churches, the statement reaffirms the principle that public funds should be used for public purposes. Rather than focusing on the relative handful of children who might be helped by a voucher program, the statement urges Christians to focus on the vast majority of students who--with or without vouchers--will remain in public schools.

The problems raised by vouchers are too numerous to elucidate here, but the NCC reminds us that the privatization of primary and secondary education is not a panacea. There are the obvious constitutional problems of using tax dollars to subsidize religious schools. "Sinful and tyrannical," Thomas Jefferson called it. Though softer in its prose, the NCC makes the same point: "We also caution that government aid to primary and secondary religious schools could undermine the [religious] schools' independence and compromise their religious message." No doubt. Taxpayers tend to demand accountability from--and exercise control over--every institution they fund.

The statement ends with specific calls to action:

- Encourage churches to host candidate forums during school board elections.
- Support better teacher training and smaller class sizes.
- Support standards-based reform with its accompanying accountability.
- Advocate repair and modernization of school facilities.

"The Public Schools at the Close of the 20th Century" sets forth a vision that is as American as the banjo and as Christian as the cross. By partnering/volunteering with neighborhood schools, Christians can provide hands-on support. By organizing politically to provide increased and more equitable funding for schools, Christians can bear prophetic witness.

The NCC has taken an important step by raising its voice in support of public schools. The silence of mainline and Orthodox churches in recent years has allowed other voices to dominate the education debate--voices that are negative or largely secular. At last a religious body is reminding us what's at stake: nothing less than the saving of America's children.