

Why Tennessee Forces Seventh Graders to Learn Islam

How big is the distinction between education and indoctrination? Not terribly, if you [ask some Tennessee lawmakers](#). They are pushing to remove any mention of religion from [Tennessee's State Academic Standards](#). At issue is an apparently controversial unit in seventh grade world history class that spends some time exploring Islam. At some point, the students even need to [commit the five pillars of Islam to memory](#).

Needless to say, this issue has generated a lot of heat on all sides. [State Representative Sheila Butts \(R\) believes](#) that exposing students to Islam threatens to indoctrinate them. Others argue that students can't effectively learn about world history without developing an understanding of the religions that shape that history, which includes Islam. (And for the record, the Tennessee State Academic Standards cover [Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Shinto](#); it just so happens that in seventh grade world history, students cover Islam before other religions.)

Let's put aside the question of what the right way to teach history is, at least for a moment. What worries me, as a school choice advocate, is that within a public school system, whatever decision is made will be a political one, and the results will apply to all public schools across the state. There will be a winning side and a losing side, and the losing side – throughout the entire state of Tennessee – will have little choice but to send their children to public schools that teach in a way they see as unsatisfactory. And who will choose what side prevails? The state's department of education.

Religion has always been a thorny issue in US schools. In the

early 1800s, American “common schools” were very Protestant, which led to [a stand-off in New York by Catholics](#) who understandably didn’t want their tax money going to Protestant public schools. (Eventually, many frustrated Catholics formed their own private Catholic schools.)

In 1922, the [state of Washington outlawed all private schools](#) (a law the Supreme Court found unconstitutional), largely motivated by a desire to eliminate Catholic schools. Since then, we’ve had legal battles over [school-led prayer](#) and [student-led prayer](#), over whether schools can or should teach [creation](#) accounts of [human origins](#) in biology classes, and even over [whether schools can allow “released time,”](#) where students can leave school premises to learn about a religion of their choice during the school day.

Few of these controversies would have been as heated in a system of private schools. With markets, what goes on within one firm doesn’t dictate what must go on in another. If Chick-Fil-A wants to stay closed on Sundays, that doesn’t mean that Burger King can’t choose to remain open. Back in the days when video stores were a thing, Hollywood video could choose to carry “racy” films, but that didn’t mean that Blockbuster ([which took a “family values” approach](#)) had to. People are free to shop at stores that are most in line with their values.

But that is not how disagreements play out in public schools. In the government’s school system, curricular and other decisions apply across a large territory, usually the entire state. When textbooks for science classes are chosen, all public schools in the state must use those textbooks. When the courts decide that schools cannot lead students in prayer, that decision applies to all public schools across the state. And when curricular standards for seventh grade world history are revised for the state of Tennessee, the resulting standards apply for all public schools in the state.

In a private market, these decisions could be what economists call non-zero-sum situations. If you are appalled that your child must memorize the five pillars of Islam in our children's history class and I am not, you can decide to take that up with the school and, if you still don't get your desired result, you can try to find a school that better aligns with your values. But that won't negatively affect other families who are fine with their children learning about Islam. Neither of us is in a position where a central department of education makes those decisions for everyone. All of us are free to find or start schools in line with our values.

These differences turn into heated conflicts when you and I disagree in a public school system, because for either of us to get our way, the other will have to lose. Instead of taking the issue up with the school, we take it up with the school board for the entire state to see who can garner the most favor.

Imagine if Chick-Fil-A could only close on Sundays if it got enough support to sway the Board of Rapid Dining Establishments to force Burger King and all other restaurants to do the same.

Historian of education Charles Glenn [has written about](#) the noisy history of religion's place in America's public schools. He writes of the difficulty American public education has had in finding one approach that accommodates all of our rich religious and cultural diversity. He concludes, "We have reason to hope that America may achieve a degree of pluralism in its schools, but important changes are needed. American public education should be disestablished and demythologized."

But wait, critics might say; if we disestablish public education and allow for robust school choice, doesn't that mean that some will choose educational forms that I regard as abhorrent?

Yes, I am sure that will happen. But in the world we inhabit, there is vast and persistent disagreement about what the proper elements are for a good education, a very complex issue. Until the day when we reach a truly voluntary consensus on what a good education looks like (not, as we do today, a consensus forced on us by legislation), the better path is to allow individuals to opt out of schools they believe teach inconsistently with their values.

That means you can go your way, I can go mine, and the state department of education never has the thankless task of deciding who is right.

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