

What Americans can learn from the Canadian school system



The [recent United States Supreme Court decision regarding religious schools](#) brings to mind a basic difference in philosophy between this country and Canada. The Canadian view makes good sense. The American approach does not.

First, set the stage. While it is a parliamentary democracy – a robust and free democracy – in Canada a majority in parliament chooses the head of government. Americans have a slightly different system, in which American voters elect the super-citizens, called the electors, who actually put the executive, or the president, in office.

Canada also is committed firmly to the separation of church and state.

This having been said, Canada proceeds to the question of educating its young with these two basic principles. Basically, fundamentally and essentially parents have the obligation to educate their children in the manner that the parents see as best. With this responsibility comes the rights of parents to form decisions, and to act upon them, regarding the education of their own children.

Next, the general society, acting through, and with, the resources of government – such as funds accumulated from taxes – has the solemn obligation to assist parents in their task of education. Of course, some problems can intervene. If a school's curriculum is so poor that children are taught that two plus two equal seven, the government can set standards to protect the children from being taught error.

Religion, however, is out of bounds. Parents have the right to

educate their own, and not even parliament can tell a parent that his or her religion is out of bounds in schooling. Parents, being citizens, have the right to believe as they prefer, and they have the right to pass their beliefs onto the children, in the thought that their beliefs best will guide their children in their lives.

Such is the parents' solemn and obvious right, obvious if you follow the Canadian way of thinking.

In this country, our government long has said that parents are responsible for children, and the public authority is required to assist by providing public schools, but parents lose the right, or it is curtailed, not by them voluntarily, but by the intrusion of government when religion enters the picture.

Thus, if parents choose to make religion a part of their child's upbringing, the American system says they must go it alone. If the parents create schools in which their own beliefs are stressed, then the government not only leaves the scene but obliquely often cripples the religious school by denying it any support.

Canadian thought would call this an outrageous affront to the rights of parents. No one says that every aspect of Canadian schooling is perfect, but it is much more in keeping with the goal of recognizing the rights of parents, as citizens, in this regard at least.

The [judgments this summer by the Supreme Court](#) expressly regarding non-public, denominational education are in the right direction, although many a long day probably will pass before public aid to religious schools will be seen in this country, or before a majority of Americans will see such need as absolutely appropriate and indeed required by our Constitution and fundamental political philosophy.

Public schools have a long history in the United States, but they did not exactly come over on the Mayflower. When they

truly bloomed, they met resistance. Some critics today would call them "socialism." Parents have the obligation to educate their own, but they have no responsibility to provide schooling for anyone else's child.

As a priest, I have no children, but I willingly pay taxes that support public schools. Why? A well-educated population is good for all, and all have the obligation to assist in educating the next generation.

This is the primary goal that should apply. Pursuing it, as is the case in Canada, without penalizing parents who think that religion is vital in education, hopefully, one day will guide American policy.

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