



California Three Rs Advisory Committee

Glen Thomas

California County Superintendents
Educational Services Association

John Ferguson

First Amendment Center

John Burns

California Department of Education

Cheryl Brown

Black Voice News

Forrest Turpin

Christian Educators

Association International

Rich Foley

Association of California School
Administrators

Marjorie Green

Anti-Defamation League

Ruben Zepeda

California Council for the
Social Studies

Todd Clark

Constitutional Rights
Foundation

Chris Jochim

San Jose State University

Samuel Swofford

California Commission on Teacher
Credentialing

Jana Flores

California History-Social Science
Project

Jan Domene

California PTA

Mynga Futrell

Atheists & Other FreeThinkers

Shabbir Mansuri

Council on Islamic Education

Thomas Butler

Catholic Diocese of Sacramento

Wayne Jacobsen

BridgeBuilders

D. Keith Naylor

Occidental College

Nancy Nielson

California Council of Churches

Cathy Gentilucci

California ASCD

Jackie Berman

Jewish Community Relations Council

California Three Rs

Rights, Responsibility, and Respect

A Project of the California County Superintendents Educational
Services Association and the First Amendment Center

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Finding Common Ground

Building trust among parents and the community in our public schools is essential before we can create the consensus necessary to successfully accomplish many of today's educational reforms. But, as the diversity of culture, religion and ideology increases, conflict, distrust and extremism also seems to grow, making this trust more and more difficult to accomplish. Since public schools are the primary institution enabling our society to live with its deepest differences, it is essential to "find common ground" around which to create a civil dialogue in support of the policies and reforms needed to effectively educate tomorrow's diverse citizenry.

Knowing that much of the debate revolved around what is now called the "culture wars," the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association and the First Amendment Center formed a partnership some ten years ago to support California schools in "Finding Common Ground" based on the First Amendment principles of religious liberty. These guidelines, outlined below, can serve as a tool for building trust with parents and serve as the foundation on which to establish relationships with the faith community to support student success.

1. Agree on the ground rules.

In any public-policy debate, all sides need to recall that, as citizens, each of us has already agreed to the democratic first principles that govern our common life. These principles of rights, responsibilities, and respect flow from the First Amendment and are the ground rules within which we negotiate our differences in the "public square" of America.

2. Include all of the stakeholders.

If agreements and policies are to inspire broad support in the community, all stakeholders must be fully represented in the discussion. Seek members of the community, even those who are critics of the schools, who are most interested in dialogue. If unsure who to include, use the list of groups represented on the California Three Rs Advisory Committee as a guide.

3. Listen to all sides

While it is true that a small number of people resist efforts to reach common ground, most Americans, when given an opportunity, want to find a way forward that best serves the schools and the community. Find the point at which people agree and work from there.

4. Work for comprehensive policies

Address a broad range of religion-and-schools issues (curriculum, school prayer, holiday observances, graduation, character education programs, clubs) in developing a district policy. Once the commitment is made to establish a comprehensive policy, begin the search for common ground with the areas where agreement is most likely to be achieved. Putting aside labels and stereotypes and taking seriously the position of the “other side” are the starting points for genuine dialogue. Go beyond asking “What is legal?” and begin asking “What is the right thing to do for my community?” and “What best protects the conscience of every student and parent?”

5. Be pro-active

Some school leaders avoid addressing religion and school issues, convinced that to raise these questions may cause controversy where there is currently none. Districts unprepared for controversy fare poorly when a conflict arises (and it will). The establishment of mutually agreed policies in the area of religion opens the door to resolving other areas of conflict related to diversity.

6. Civil Debate

Commit to civil debate as a ground rule for the process. Conflict and debate are a vital part of a democratic system. However, how we debate is as critical as what we debate. Personal attacks, name-calling, and similar tactics destroy the fabric of our society and undermine the educational mission of schools. All parties must agree to treat one another with civility and respect in resolving educational policy issues among adults, just as we demand it of the students.

7. Follow-Through

Be sure that the entire community is informed of all policies concerning religion, values and religious liberty. If an effort has been made to keep the broader community involved through participation in the committee and through periodic public meetings, there will be people available to help explain the policy to the various constituents of the school. Once disseminated and explained, policies raise expectations about school performance. That is why it is vitally important for schools to follow up policy statements with staff development for administrators and teachers.

You may download a copy of “Finding Common Ground” by Charles C. Haynes and Oliver Thomas, a First Amendment guide to religion and public education published by the First Amendment Center as an Adobe Acrobat file from their website at the following URL <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/about.aspx?id=6276> You may order a print copy for \$19.95 from Amazon.com. An education discount of \$10.00 per copy is available for orders of 10 books or more. For discount, contact Euraine Brooks at 703/284-2809.

Future bulletins of the California Three Rs Project will highlight timely topics from “Finding Common Ground” and current related issues in California. If you have a topic of particular concern, please contact one of the project leads listed on the back page of this bulletin. If you wish to be placed on the direct distribution list for this bulletin, please send an email to peg_hill@sbcss.k12.ca.us requesting it.

About the First Amendment Center

The First Amendment Center works to preserve and protect First Amendment freedoms through information and education. The center serves as a forum for the study and exploration of free-expression issues, including freedom of speech, of the press and of religion, the right to assemble and petition the government.

For further information contact: First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University, 1207 18th Ave. S., Nashville, TN 37212, Telephonel: 615/727-1600 Fax: 615/727-1319 E-mail: info@fac.org

No Child Left Behind and Constitutionally Protected Prayer and Public Schools

September 29, 2003
10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.
California Department of Education Office
1430 N Street
Sacramento, CA 94244-2720
Room 4101

Speaker: John Ferguson
First Amendment Education Coordinator
First Amendment Center

As a condition of receiving funds under the No Child Let Behind Act, each Local Eduational Agency in California must certify in writing to the CDE that no policy of the LEA prevents or otherwise denies participation in constitutionally protected prayer in public elementary and secondary schools.

What does this mean? How should districts interpet the guidlelines issued from the Secretary of Education Rod Paige? What are areas of special concern?

District and County Office of Education administrators are invited to attend this informational session.

Cost: \$35 per person, includes a light lunch and Finding Common Ground
Space is limited.

* * *

To attend, copy this page, complete the coupon below, and mail it with your registration fee to:
Margaret Hill, Ph.D. California Three Rs Project Lead, San Bernardino County Supt. of Schools,
601 North E Street, San Bernardino, CA 92410-3093

Phone: (909) 386-2611

Fax: (909) 386=2667

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If you have questions about the California Three Rs Project or wish to make inquiries about professional development, please contact:

Three Rs Project Lead

Margaret 'Peg' Hill, Ph.D.
History-Social Science Coordinator
San Bernardino County Supt. of Schools
601 North E Street
San Bernardino, CA 92410-3093
Phone: (909) 386-2611
Fax: (909) 386-2667
peg_hill@sbcss.k12.ca.us

Teaching About Religion Lead

Bruce Grelle, Ph.D.
Director Religion and Public Education
Resource Center
Department of Religious Studies
California State University Chico
Chico, CA 95929-0740
Phone: (530) 898-4739
bgrelle@csuchico.edu