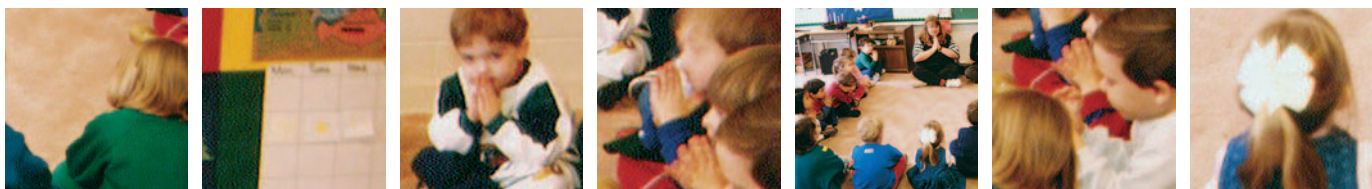


# MONKEYING Around in the Classroom

by Suzanne Crowell



Strategies that promote religion in public schools spell trouble for children still learning their ABCs. How can we keep these crusades out of the classroom?



The pot has always simmered when it comes to religion in public schools, but the religious right is making a concerted effort to turn up the heat. Whether it is school prayer, so-called “intelligent design,” tax support for religious schools, or supplying school space to faith-based organizations, the overarching agenda is clear: Put religion in the schools and tax money in the service of religion. While the actors are adults, children bear the brunt of this campaign to impose religious orthodoxy — and make the public pay for it.

Take prayer. It is clearly the task of parents to instill their beliefs, religious or otherwise, in their children. Kids surely should not be charged with resisting a majority creed when it’s incorporated into classes and assemblies. Back in 1947, the Supreme Court ruled that “no tax in any amount, large or small, can be levied to support any religious activities or institutions.” That decision was reinforced in 1962, when the court outlawed prayer in official school functions, and the following year in a ruling that school-sponsored Bible reading is unconstitutional. More recently, in 1992, the Supreme Court ruled again, barring school-sponsored prayer at graduation ceremonies.

Nevertheless, legal skirmishes continue. Some members of Congress, perhaps buoyed by the vote-getting possibilities, have vowed to pass a constitutional amendment restoring “the right to pray” in public schools — a right never in question, as many math test-takers would admit. What these politicians really want is for the religious majority to have the right to impose its beliefs on your kids.

In 1925, the Scopes “monkey” trial put science on the docket in Tennessee — and a biology teacher on trial for teaching evolution. Many of us thought science had won. Not so. Today, pressure is mounting for high school biology teachers to read students a statement questioning the validity of evolution and positing an alternative religious view dressed up as a competing intellectual theory. This view — “intelligent design” — is the ideological successor to creationism. It has nothing to do with science and everything to do with spreading belief in a particular concept of a deity.

In Ohio and Pennsylvania, science classes must cover the alleged scientific controversy surrounding evolution and offer “intelligent design” as an alternative theory. This spring, Kansas’s school board tried to add “intelligent design” to its science curriculum, and similar bills are being pushed in Alabama and Georgia.

Subsidies for private sectarian education have long been a goal of those operating parochial schools. School vouchers are actually government tuition subsidies — gleaned from taxpayer dollars and often used for religious education. And they have become a platform for those wishing to institute a “free market” in education or desiring faith-based education for their children. Such tuition payments for individual students are already being used for religious schools in Milwaukee, Cleveland, Florida (statewide), and the District of Columbia despite a lack of evidence that they achieve their intended goal: to improve academic achievement or move disadvantaged children out of failing schools. In 2002, the momentum of this dangerous thinking was made clear when, in a closely divided decision, the Supreme Court upheld the legality of vouchers (*Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, 5–4).

The *Zelman* case opened the floodgates. In March 2005 the DC Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the federally funded AmeriCorps program may subsidize volunteer teachers in Roman Catholic schools, allowing AmeriCorps personnel to teach academic subjects one minute and, after removing their AmeriCorps hats (sometimes literally removing logos), to teach religion. The case, brought by the American Jewish Congress, is under appeal.

Public education surely stirs passions. No other public institution intervenes so dramatically in the lives of our children and represents opportunity and upward mobility to so many. And perhaps no other public institution is so subject to the changing tides of politics or the whims of a determined minority. The religious right surely understands this. All the more reason why none of us can take the survival of a pluralistic public school system, free from the temptations of religious indoctrination, for granted. ➤