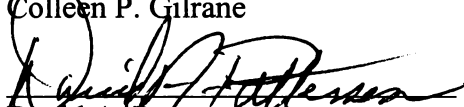
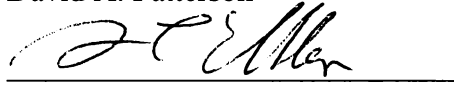


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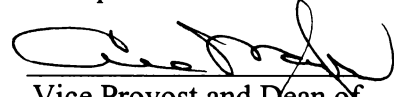
I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by David Ross Berry entitled "The Christmas Dilemma for Public Elementary School Leaders." I have examined the final paper copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education, with a major in Education.


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THE CHRISTMAS DILEMMA FOR PUBLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEADERS

A Dissertation
Presented for the
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Degree
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David Ross Berry
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ABSTRACT

Elementary school principals and teachers are often unaware of the level of pressure and turmoil that can erupt from state and church issues related to the role of Christmas in public elementary schools. This qualitative research describes interviews with administrators, teachers and parents at four public elementary schools, religious leaders and church/state scholars. Educators can be faced without much warning with a paralyzing effect on their educational environment. This study can serve in some ways as a warning to educators to become more sensitive and knowledgeable on their own school's religious diversity. The knowledge of possible reactions by various religious and non-religious groups may offer educators some guidance in making future choices.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It was early December, and the excitement was starting to build as teachers decorated their rooms and hallways in preparation for the upcoming Christmas season at Foothills Elementary School in Maryville, Tennessee. Holiday traditions were in abundance as numerous Christmas activities were planned. It seemed like a typical calendar year was coming to a close with everyone merrily anticipating the school's many seasonal programs and parties. The upcoming two-week Christmas break was also fueling the excitement. Throughout the building, Christmas music permeated the air. The greeting of "Merry Christmas" could be frequently heard from many parents, students, and teachers as they encountered each other in the hallways. However, this was a public school, and many of the traditions that had developed over the years were not sensitive to other religious beliefs or even legal within the public school environment.

The Foothills population in East Tennessee had been relatively isolated from the influence of outside groups for many years. However, because the Aluminum Company of America (ALCOA) which had previously dominated employment in the community had been gradually downsizing for a number of years, the way was opened for a number of foreign-owned businesses to move in and offer employment to locals as well as attract newcomers. The conservative Christian majority was starting to give way to a variety of religions and races.

It was Friday afternoon as Foothills Principal David Berry completed his dismissal activities and headed back to his office to complete some paperwork before heading home.

Mrs. Brown (not real name), a first grade teacher, nervously stood in the principal's office doorway and said, "Mr. Berry, Mrs. Shelley (not real name of the parent) would like to speak to you concerning our first grade Christmas party."

"Sure, send her in," replied Mr. Berry.

As she entered, Mrs. Shelley curtly stated, "You're allowing this school to teach the Christian religion to my son and that should not be done."

"Please sit down, Mrs. Shelley. What's happened?"

Waving a piece of paper, Mrs. Shelley explained, "This letter asks parents to donate food or drinks for a Christmas party next week. I see that as overtly promoting and celebrating Christianity, a religion my family doesn't follow."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Shelley, that we've offended you and your family. It's our school's policy to be sensitive to cultural differences, and I realize that it was a mistake to refer to our holiday celebration as a Christmas party. I'll check into this situation and make sure that we are more careful in the future."

As Mrs. Shelley got up to leave, she re-emphasized, "This happened in Michigan where we lived before, and I got it stopped. I even got elected to serve on the City Commission for a while, and I know how to get things done!"

"Thanks for bringing this to my attention. I also understand our legal obligations, and I assure you we will be more careful."

This conversation occurred late on Friday. Ironically, on the following Monday and Tuesday Mr. Berry and other administrators in the school system were scheduled to be out of town at a workshop on diversity training. Given the pressure of time before the first grade party and other grade preparations, it seemed wise to act quickly to demonstrate good faith with Mrs. Shelley. As a way of reaching everyone in the school quickly, Mr. Berry decided to send out an e-mail to the school's faculty and staff explaining the need to be more aware of the school's diversity and to re-emphasize the separation of church and state in public education.

Text of the E-mail

Teachers and Staff,

I've been meaning to address with our faculty what our Board of Ed. Chairman refers to as the "December Dilemma." In his book *Finding Common Ground*—Buzz Thomas provides a great deal of guidance on how we should approach the holidays. He states that "decisions about what to do in December should begin with the understanding that public schools may not sponsor religious devotions or celebrations; study about religious holidays does not extend to religious worship or practice." This means we need to be a great deal more sensitive to how we are approaching the holidays in our classrooms and around the school. For example, allowing the local service club to display posters around our school was a mistake on my part. The theme of the poster is "No Child Should Go Without At Christmas." How about those families who do not believe in this religious practice? Elementary school children are not intellectually ready to decide such issues. That is why we are not allowed to have religious clubs, unlike those allowed to be organized at the secondary level. These very sensitive issues need to be addressed and discussed in a faculty meeting in the near future. In the meantime—please be careful about using phrases that promote a particular religion. Hence, refer to upcoming parties as holiday parties and not Christmas parties. The two weeks coming up as time off should be referred to as our Winter break—not Christmas vacation. The majority of our staff, I assume, follow some form of the Christian religion and, therefore, fall into the trap of thinking everyone must be accepting of their traditional way of looking at Christmas. Let me quickly assure you this is not true or legal. Although we have traditionally broken the 1st Amendment to our U.S. Constitution—this does not mean it is right or should continue to be allowed. We have families moving into our community from literally all over the world. I would appreciate it if each of you would rethink our approach and help our school to become more tolerant of diversity. Next week I will be attending a two-day

training session on this very subject. I'll let you know what I learn about tolerance and diversity.

On Monday evening while attending the diversity conference, Mr. Berry received a phone call from his wife: "Scott [the assistant principal] called this afternoon about an e-mail you sent out Friday concerning Christmas parties. Evidently someone on your staff has had it copied and placed in all the mailboxes of your school zone."

"You're kidding! Who would do something like that?" Mr. Berry exclaimed.

"Scott wasn't sure who distributed the flyers. No one came to him to complain or comment about the e-mail," answered Mrs. Berry.

On Tuesday morning a group calling themselves Concerned Christians placed a large ad in the local newspaper with the text of Mr. Berry's e-mail. The group criticized the policy of acknowledging different religious beliefs and asked for support for their cause to keep the traditional Christian ways and prevent "outsiders" from infringing on the religious holiday celebrations that had been practiced in their schools for many years.

The phone was ringing as Mr. Berry re-entered his office on Wednesday morning.

"Dave, this is Mike [the Director of Schools]. It looks as if we need to talk. Could I stop by your office in about thirty minutes? Buzz Thomas [the Chairman of the School Board as well as a lawyer and minister well-versed in church/state issues] also wants to meet with both of us tomorrow to see if he can be of any help."

"Mike, come on over. I've got a note on my desk to call *The Daily Times* about my e-mail, and I'd like to have your ideas on how to handle talking with the media. Also one of my parents, an ordained minister, is waiting to talk with me. If we're still talking when you get here, come on in."

After talking over the situation with the Director of Schools, Mr. Berry went ahead and set up a phone interview with the local reporter, but only after Mr. Berry asked the writer not to quote him and instead wait for a formal statement from the Board Chairman.

Before the statement had time to be printed, however, there were already letters to the paper's editor being published. Most were negative, running about 3 to 1 against being more sensitive to a diverse population. Other letters and e-mails sent directly to Mr. Berry were generally supportive in recognizing that public schools in America need to be more sensitive to non-Christian children.

Finally, the Board Chairman's comments on the Christmas issue were published on the front page of *The Daily Times*. Included in the article were quotes from Mr. Berry (although he had asked not to be quoted) and Charles Rutherford (who had no connection to Foothills), the leader of a group calling themselves Concerned Christians. After the publication of the front page article, Chairman Thomas, like the principal, became a focal point of criticism by those who wanted Christmas and Christian beliefs to be included in the school exactly as they had been in the past.

The next day a faculty meeting was held as a chance to sort through the issue. Because no one had ever stepped forth to claim being the one who released the e-mail, a number of people spoke of their sense of betrayal that the school would be anonymously targeted without anyone ever speaking first to Mr. Berry or others to try to settle the issue internally. Others spoke of their own personal difficulties in dealing with people's assumptions that all faiths, including Christianity, should match conservative Christian

practices and beliefs. The meeting seemed productive, for most left the meeting still talking through and sharing their ideas about the school's mission within an increasingly multi-cultural community.

This scenario reflects what many educators confront: How should public education function within a diverse culture? Because the United States has a traditionally strong Judeo-Christian heritage, many communities have in the past been comfortable absorbing the holidays and traditions of that heritage into public education. The month of December is especially rich in religious ritual and celebration. Consequently, during that month educators must pay special attention to the larger goal of church and state separation. The difficulty lies in deciding what course to take among competing value systems and perceptions of the role of public education.

Problem Statement

Public educational environments are usually assumed to be free of the kinds of biases that are not good for youthful or adult interactions. In such a setting one of the more delicate and difficult issues to balance in a democracy is the role of the church and state in the public schools. Most could not have imagined that the idea of preparing for a Christmas party would create a dilemma for anyone at Foothills Elementary School. Yet after an incident with a non-Christian parent during the early weeks of December, the school's seemingly tranquil atmosphere suddenly disappeared via local newspaper headlines that indicated there was, in fact, a deep-seated problem. Foothills School's traditional approach to the Christmas season perhaps needed a closer analysis, but

obviously any change would be viewed by some Christians as an attack on their beliefs and freedom of religious rights.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine how four elementary schools in different cultural and policy settings handle the church and state issues associated with the Christmas dilemma (e.g., division within the school and community, varying definitions of the mission of the school, sudden personal exposure and questions from the media, and scrutiny of the school and administrators by other educational leaders). Principals and teachers who are unaware of the level of pressure and turmoil that can erupt from an emotional religious issue (especially Christmas) can be faced without much warning with a paralyzing effect on their educational environment. This study can serve in some ways as a warning to educators to become more sensitive and knowledgeable on their own school's religious diversity. The knowledge of possible reactions by various religious and non-religious groups may also offer educators some guidance in making future choices.

In this case study the religious holiday Christmas is identified and discussed through an exploratory data collection approach, using Robert K. Yin's comparative structure model (1994) to present the Christmas dilemma at Foothills Elementary as the events relate or compare to three other elementary schools (one in the same geographical region and two outside) and to their leadership. Therefore, this study focused on decisions faced by public elementary school leaders in connection with the Christmas holiday.

The researcher subdivided the topic into questions to establish a sequence of inquiry:

- 1) To what extent do religious holidays such as Christmas present challenges to elementary school administrators?
- 2) How have these leadership challenges been manifested in elementary school activities?
- 3) What steps are some elementary school principals taking and what policies are they following to deal with religious issues like Christmas?

Significance of the Study

Little research has been undertaken on how elementary school leaders honor religious diversity of students, parents and staff members while simultaneously honoring the laws of the land. This lack of research is surprising given the controversy that church and state issues have historically created throughout the United States. There are strategies by a number of groups who either support the idea of separation of church and state or seek to eliminate this separation. The external and internal influences by certain religious and non religious groups within public educational institutions have hidden as well as overt impacts on curriculum decisions. While there is an extensive body of literature that discusses the legal aspects of religion and public schools, there is limited research analyzing the specific challenges educational leaders in elementary schools face in dealing with religious issues or more specifically religious holidays. Public education's approach to Christmas seems to be the most explosive policy to formulate because what

might be termed the *Christmas dilemma* results from mixed emotions felt by both school staffs and community members.

Limitations and Assumptions

As with other comparative case studies, the limitations of this study include difficulty of generalizability and the subjectivity inherent in the interview data collection process.

The basic premise of the proposed research is that the state and church issue called the Christmas dilemma can best be addressed through a dual case study research format. It is also assumed that during data collection efforts individuals will be willing to truthfully discuss sensitive religious issues in a professional manner. Furthermore, it is believed that some school systems' religious diversity policies help provide a balance and acceptance by a greater number of people within an educational community.

This study deals only with religion rather than ethnicity as related to the Christian holiday Christmas. Religion and ethnic issues can be differentiated. Ethnic issues include racial, national, or cultural groups as opposed to religion that can cross these ethnic boundaries. Religion involves a system of faith and worship of a particular deity or deities.

Definitions

Bible Belt-The area of the South and Middle West that is noted for the strong influence of Protestant fundamentalism (Hirsch, Kett & Trefil, 1993).

Christmas dilemma-The problems administrators and teachers face during the Christian holiday season of Christmas in assuring the public that the school's official approach is to study the holiday and not celebrate this particular religious holiday.

Exclusion of Christmas-Public elementary school personnel whose policy purposefully keeps all religious and secular aspects of this holiday out of their school.

Inclusion of Christmas-Public elementary school personnel whose policy allows aspects of the holiday to be included in their school activities.

Wall of separation-The phrase (credited to Thomas Jefferson) that describes the court's interpretation of church and state issues that the two entities are to remain neutral of each other. Therefore, the government is not to promote or hinder a citizen's religious or non-religious beliefs as emphasized in the 1st Amendment of the United States Constitution.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

General Overview of the School Holiday Issue

How do elementary school leaders simultaneously honor and respect their school's diverse populations and stay within the necessary legal boundaries? This literature review will examine church and state legal issues, organized supporters of the separation concept, organized supporters of resistance to the concept, educators' points of view and educators' challenges.

A review of the literature indicates a general consensus that educators, parents and students in public schools need to understand school policies and practices concerning religion (Mawdsley, 1999; Nord, 1995; Peach & Reddick, 1995); however, opinions on policy management vary. In particular, Christian holidays have traditionally been incorporated into the lesson plans of many teachers. As Kentucky English teacher Teresa Shelton states, "I use Christmastime as a teachable moment. Students share their family traditions—religious or non-religious—with their classmates" (Claborn, Couch, Joynes, Shelton, & Teegarden, 1997, p. 20). The fine line of studying versus celebrating Christian teachings has frequently been crossed. This practice seems fairly clear in this statement by California teacher Karen Claborn: "when my students want to add a little holiday sparkle to the classroom and curriculum, I let them. We celebrate Christmas and any other winter religion, in all their diversity" (1997, p. 20). One recent study even found that some teachers in the South—despite the threat of legal action—still quietly teach the Bible (Hardy, 1998). However, immigration and the recent mobility of people

in the United States continues to bring more diverse cultural backgrounds and beliefs together in a geographical location. Public educators' efforts to be sensitive to the cultural differences of their school's population may cause an explosion of heated debate over the way religious issues are approached or avoided (e.g., Benen, 1999; Fraser, 1999; Harkness, 1989; Kaplan, 1998; Menendez, 1994; Murray, 1992; Zirkel, 2000).

The impact of diversity in learning styles within a classroom has been discussed and researched by educators for a number of years (Gardner, 1983; 1993). For example, gender (Biklen & Pollard, 1993), language (Kang, 1995; Trueba, 1989) and the effects of family perspective (Kagan & Weissbourd, 1994) have been researched. However, the value of celebrating diversity within the existing framework of the American educational system has sometimes been questioned in the research (Vogl & Jaros, 1998). Therefore, it is no surprise that the diversity of religious beliefs often causes controversy that erupts in many current classrooms (Banfield, 1995; Prettyman, 1999).

Legal Issues

Constitutional Background

In the First Amendment of the United States Constitution the Establishment Clause states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." Legally, this means the government (which includes public schools) must remain neutral toward religion and, therefore, must not become entangled with any religious group. This also means that the government cannot pass laws that will help or support one religion over another. Above all, American citizens cannot be forced to believe or not believe in a higher being or in any religious idea. Numerous freedom of religion cases have been

brought before the courts and provide important assistance to public educators (e.g., Alley, 1994; Kramnick & Moore, 1999; McWhirter, 1994).

Political thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison provided the theoretical basis for the separation of church and state concept. This concept is established in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution and has been ambiguously interpreted in many court cases (Alexander & Alexander, 1998). Unfortunately, it is this vagueness that creates the atmosphere for church and state controversies like the Christmas dilemma at Foothills School. However, Jefferson's thoughts on the separation issue seemed to be very clear in that "giving thanks to God or repenting before God were private religious activities, pious devotions, if you will; civil officers, whether mayors, governors, or presidents, had no business in these intimate matters" (Gaustad, 1996, p. 98). During his first presidential term Jefferson sent a letter to the Danbury, Connecticut Baptist's Association that presented his interpretation of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution describing what he called a "wall of separation" existing between church and state (Mayer, 1999, p. 164). Although the phrase "wall of separation" is not in the Constitution, Jefferson's words have been accepted and extensively used by those who support this interpretation (Mayer, 1999). His stand on religion may have seemed anti-religious, but in truth he was a very intensely religious person (Jefferson, 1989).

The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment also seems very clear on the separation of church and state. The Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution has been interpreted to support the separation of church and state as well. Yet the idea of the wall

of separation was not really invoked by the Supreme Court until *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947). The wall seemed to get higher and higher in the 1970's with Supreme Court's rulings that prevented nonpublic schools from receiving public tax aid (Alexander & Alexander, 1998). More recently, however, a number of people in the United States have become less accepting of the separation of church and state (Cooper, 1986), perhaps because the wall existed in theory but not always in practice. Recent action by the Supreme Court also suggests the wall of separation may be crumbling (Alexander & Alexander, 1998).

Traditionally, however, the judicial system has been consistent in upholding the concept of the wall of separation (Johnson, Dupuis, Musial, Hall, & Gollnick, 1996). However, building-level administrators are constantly faced with legal questions concerning religious liberty as applied to specific situations. Numerous issues have been brought up by religious groups based on questions about the Constitutional separation of church and state (Bracey, 1999). One approach to this religious controversy is to agree on the basic "civic ground rules, rooted in the 'three Rs' of religious liberty: Rights, Responsibilities, and Respect" (Haynes, 1993/1994, p. 33). Ron Brandt, Executive Editor of *Educational Leadership*, asserts that even needed educational reform is debated in many communities "by opposition from parent and community groups who see these innovations as contrary to their religious values" (1993/1994, p. 3). The need for principals and teachers to be trained to work within culturally diverse communities and understand how to deal in a legal manner with sensitive religious or reform issues makes

it imperative that they have access to appropriate Constitutional knowledge of what educators can and can not do (Brodkin & Coleman, 1996; Prettyman, 1999).

State/Church Cases

The famous Scope's trial in Dayton, Tennessee dealing with religion and science highlighted the separation of church and state conflict. The Tennessee law like many laws in other states prevented evolution from being taught in the public school classroom (Pulliam, 1991). In 1925, a high school teacher named John Scopes taught his students about Darwin's theory of evolution which eventually led to the so-called "monkey trial." Noted criminal lawyer and social reformer Clarence Darrow served as Scope's lawyer. He was pitted against William Jennings Bryan, a three time loser for the presidency of the United States. Byran prosecuted the case based on the Bible. Although he technically won the case, Darrow's defense was more noteworthy and had a more long reaching impact on church and state issues (Alexander & Alexander, 1998).

One case that demonstrates the changes in attitudes toward matters of school policy initially seemed to violate the principle of religious neutrality. In *Minersville v. Gobitis* (1940) the Supreme Court ruled that public schools could force students to salute and pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America even if doing so violated their religious beliefs. However, this case was overturned in *West Virginia State Board v. Barnette* (1943) in which the Court not only eliminated forcing a student to pledge allegiance to the flag, but broadened this to say that students did not have to make this pledge if it violated their individual consciences. On June 26, 2002, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in California ruled that the "under God" section of the Pledge of

Allegiance added in 1954 (Hirsch, Kett & Trefil, 1993) was unconstitutional since it endorsed religion. If the ruling is upheld, children in public schools in western states will not be allowed to say the pledge with this phrase in it. The lawsuit was brought by Californian Michael Newdow, an atheist, who objected to his 2nd grade daughter being required to recite the pledge. He said it was his “right as a parent to be able to send my child to school and not have government implicate [sic] religious belief” (“Pledge plaintiff explains why he sued,” 2002).

Five years later in *McCollum v. Board of Education* (1948) the Court continued to affirm the church and state separation by ruling that religious instruction on public school campuses was unconstitutional since this practice violated the establishment clause. In *Zorach v. Clausen* (1952) the court did rule constitutional the practice of release time (off campus) for students in public schools to receive religious instruction.

Other specific religious practices, such as prayer and Bible reading, have also been important issues that the Supreme Court has heard and ruled on. *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) determined school prayer to be unconstitutional. Thirty-three years later in *Wallace v. Jaffree* (1985) the Court extended this legal concept to ban the moment of silence practiced in public schools if it replaced prayer. The Court stayed very consistent with its rulings in *School District of Abington v. Schempp* (1963) in that the Bible was not to be read over the intercom and in *Murray v. Curlett* (1963) that students could not be forced to participate in prayer and Bible reading. In *Lee v. Weisman* (1992) the Court has also ruled that prayer by clergy at public school graduations is unconstitutional.

The teaching of evolution that had been dealt with in the Scope's trial (1925) was again heard and ruled on in *Epperson v. Arkansas* (1968). However, in this case the ruling was that the state could not ban the teaching of evolution. In a later case *Edwards v. Aguillard* (1987), the court ruled unconstitutional the Louisiana law that attempted to enforce equal teaching of evolution and the Genesis creation story. The court ruled this state law had a basic religious purpose and was therefore unconstitutional.

The Equal Access Act passed by the U.S. Congress in 1984 was based on a higher education case *Widmar v. Vincent* (1981) and allowed students the right to participate in religious noncurricular and club activities. The Reagan Administration applied this ruling as legal justification for public high school students to have religious activities on their campuses (Alexander & Alexander, 1998; Morris, 1990). In a challenge to this application, the Court ruled in *Board of Education of Westside Community Schools v. Mergens* (1990) that the Equal Access Act does not violate the 1st Amendment. Public high school students have the right to organize and meet during noninstructional times in forums that can be philosophical, religious or political. On this same issue the court ruled in *Lamb's Chapel et al. v. Center Moriches Union Free School District* (1993) that school buildings can be used by religious groups after school if the school system allows other groups to use its facilities.

An additional constitutional issue that has implications for public education concerns nativity displays. There have been two cases in which the courts have ruled on the use of nativity scenes and government property. *Lynch v. Donnelly* (1984) ruled that government-owned nativity scenes can be displayed on private property without violating

the Establishment Clause. However, in *Allegheny v. ACLU* (1989) the court ruled that it is unconstitutional to display nativity scenes in government buildings (which might be interpreted as including public school buildings).

Public/Private School Cases

The main contention between public schools and some religious groups seems to be based on these groups' beliefs that religion and education should not be separated (Alexander & Alexander, 1998; Haynes & Thomas, 1998). Therefore, it is no surprise that some church groups operating religious schools have sought funds from government agencies to support their programs. A number of cases have been heard and ruled on by the courts with mixed results.

The following four cases are not supportive of private religious school policies:

- *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971)—This benchmark decision by the Court ruled that state supplements to the salary of Catholic school teachers were unconstitutional. This case was the first enunciation of the three-part *Lemon* test of Constitutionality of state statutes: legislative purpose must be secular, cannot inhibit or advance religion, and cannot foster excessive government entanglement with religion.
- *Committee for Public Education and Religious Liberty v. Nyquist* (1973) and in *Sloan v. Lemon* (1973)—The Court ruled that states cannot reimburse parents for expenses incurred by sending their children to religious schools.
- *Aguilar v. Felton* (1985)—The Court ruled that sending public school teachers to religious schools to teach remedial courses and serve as guidance

counselors was unconstitutional. (Note: this was overruled in *Agostini v. Felton* (1997).

- *Kiryas Joel Village School District v. Grumet* (1994)—The Court ruled that a school district zoned for religious purposes violates the Establishment Clause.

In contrast, the following cases seem to provide support for private religious schools:

- *Everson v. Board of Education of Ewing Tp.* (1947)—The Court ruled the state could reimburse bus fares to religious schools.
- *Board of Education of Central School District No. 1 v. Allen* (1968)—The Court ruled the state can loan textbooks to private and religious schools.
- *Tilton v. Richardson* (1971)—The Court ruled that giving federal funds for building classrooms for private, religious, and public colleges is constitutional.
- *Meek v. Pittenger* (1975)—The Court ruled that textbooks could be loaned to religious schools, but no other materials.
- *Roemer v. Board of Public Works* (1976)—The Court ruled that the state can award grants to private and religious schools.
- *Committee for Public Education and Religious Liberty v. Regan* (1980)—The Court ruled that a state could reimburse religious schools for the cost of giving achievement tests.
- *Mueller v. Allen* (1983)—The Court ruled that tax deductions for tuition to parochial schools did not violate the Establishment Clause.

- *Zobrest v. Catalina Foothills School District* (1993)—Special Education services under IDEA for students attending a religious schools do not violate the Establishment Clause.
- *Agostini v. Felton* (1997)—The Court overturned the *Aguilar* case and ruled that public school teachers may provide supplemental remedial instruction to disadvantaged students in religious schools.

In summary, public aid to private religious schools has been challenged in the courts for a number of years and will probably continue to be a judiciary topic needing further clarification.

Challenges to State Laws

In the 1970's and 1980's the courts were involved in accusations by some groups that public schools were teaching secular humanism (a view that encouraged students to determine right and wrong based on their own internal values rather than established religious values). Critics interpreted state requirements for schools to teach ethical standards and moral decision-making as an infringement on their religious beliefs (Alexander & Alexander, 1998; Tilley, 1987).

The laws on compulsory school attendance rules in Ohio led to one of the earliest cases testing the rights of private religious schools to disregard state law. Required attendance was the basis for *State of Ohio v. Whisner* (1976). In this case, the Tabernacle Christian School founded by Levi Whisner argued that because of religious principles the school could not follow certain state standards such as attendance requirements. The Ohio Supreme Court held that the parents' religious rights were infringed upon if private

schools were forced to follow these state attendance standards. The Courts have also tended to shift on state statutes dealing with the moment of silence concept by ruling it unconstitutional in *Wallace v. Jaffree* (1985), but constitutional in *Brown v. Gwinnett County School District* (1995). Furthermore, a Tennessee case *Mozert v. Hawkins County Board of Education* (1987) ruled that the requirement of students to read the basal reading textbook was not a violation of their religious beliefs. The court disagreed with the plaintiffs who claimed that teaching values was a religion called secular humanism. An Alabama case *Smith v. Board of School Commissioners of Mobile County* (11th Cir. 1987) also supported the concept that public schools serve as a vehicle to teach fundamental values in promoting a democratic society (Alexander & Alexander, 1998).

Support for the “Wall of Separation” from Organized Groups

Albert J. Menendez, the Research Director of the Americans for Religious Liberty, writes in “Christmas in the School: Can Conflicts Be Avoided?” that some religious minorities and civil libertarians in the United States are concerned about their public schools’ approach to religious holidays (1994). These groups suggest that school districts may be misinterpreting or overtly breaking Constitutional law by celebrating (and implicitly endorsing) Christmas. The writings of Menendez suggest that Christmas with its meaning of peace and tranquillity is threatened with the reality of controversy and discrimination towards many non-Christian groups.

One source of this sort of controversy began early in the 20th century when several states passed laws approving extended Christmas breaks for public schools. This overt action by legislative bodies was met with pockets of resistance. In 1906, for

example, thousands of New York Jewish students boycotted classes to protest required student attendance at Christmas assembly programs. As a result, the New York City Schools dropped all religious activities. In contrast, some school districts attempted to accommodate the Jewish communities by incorporating Hanukah observances within the Christmas holidays. However, several Jewish leaders have considered these attempts to be patronizing because Hanukah was originally considered to be a relatively minor Jewish holiday (Menendez, 1994).

One organization was specially created to provide support for church and state separation. The Americans United for the Separation of Church and State (AU) was organized in 1947 to guarantee religious freedom for all Americans. The group's current executive director, Barry W. Lynn, has debated political and religious leaders on the importance of church and state separation. The AU also formed Project Fair Play to actively seek ways "to protect the spiritual mission of churches and the integrity of the political process" (Lynn, 1996). The work of Lynn and the AU has resulted in attacks from conservative politicians and religious leaders, including one led by North Carolina's Senator Jesse Helms for a federal investigation of the organization by the United States Attorney General. This investigation failed to prove any wrongdoing. Yet the success by prominent conservative Christian leader Pat Robertson to get Helms and five other Senators to seek legal cessation of the AU's agenda indicates powerful opposition of the concept of separation of church and state. Lynn contends that Robertson has attacked the AU because it has been effective in blowing "the whistle on his [Pat Robertson] political

shenanigans, his efforts to raid the public treasury and his blistering insults about people whose religion differs from his own” (1999, p. 195).

As the AU has experienced, those who support the wall of separation can sometimes face strong criticism. For example, nationally-known educator Robert Marzano has been targeted by conservative-Christian groups as being anti-Christian. In an article in *Educational Leadership* entitled “When Two Worldviews Collide,” he presents a defense of his hotly-contested program *Tactics for Thinking* (1993/94) against groups who claim that his work advocates secular humanism as a religious New Age concept. *Tactics for Thinking* is a program for educators to learn teaching techniques to help their students develop and improve their skills as problem-solvers. He suggests that anyone who promotes the idea that children should become open-minded thinkers will become subject to attacks by conservative-Christian groups (1993/1994).

A mass mailing in 2000 by the American Civil Liberties Union’s (ACLU) Executive Director Ira Glasser sought support from Americans to fight groups led by such nationally known conservative leaders as Pat Robertson, Jesse Helms, and Pat Buchanan. Glasser says these men’s agenda is to tell the citizens of this country which religion they should follow. The ACLU opposes anyone who advocates less state and church separation. This organization was founded on the idea that civic morality means that the citizenry of the nation are to be treated with tolerance regardless of their religion or lack of religion. They assert the democratic process should protect everyone’s rights in such areas as religion. Glasser’s letter is a request not only for membership into the ACLU, but also a request for monetary support of their causes. A document entitled

“National Citizen’s Survey On Civic Morality” was included with the mass mailing with the purpose of surveying the number of citizens who are in agreement with the ACLU’s agenda (Glasser, 2000).

Another group that takes a similar position on religion and politics is called the Interfaith Alliance. The Executive Director of this group is C. Welton Gaddy. Their organization is backed by 50 different faith traditions and has the purpose of standing up against the religious right. The Interfaith Alliance argues that the religious right is trying to influence elections to gain control over mainstream American religious freedoms. Tolerance of religious differences by promoting cooperation and respect is their main emphasis. This group like others has used a mass mailing technique that includes a letter of purpose, a survey and financial request to test the support or lack of support of their mission. Their latest document was entitled “2000 National Religion & Politics Poll.”

Resistance to the “Wall of Separation” from Organized Groups

In general, the reluctance by public schools to incorporate religious studies into their curriculum has been taken by some religious groups as an act of hostility towards religion (Bates, 1993). Pat Robertson writes that public schools have been slowly infiltrated by believers of humanism who see nothing wrong with exposing children to non-Christian ideas (1990). Similar to Robertson’s approach, an organization called the Citizens for Excellence in Education (CEE) headed by Robert Simonds has been making a concerted effort to elect Christian school board members to regain control of the public schools (1983). It is the belief of conservative Christian groups such as those headed by leaders like Pat Robertson and Robert Simonds that they must use “whatever measures

[are] necessary to eradicate or at least retard the spread of any principle that contradicted [Bible-believing Christians]" (Marzano, 1993/1994, p. 10). Eric Buehrer, the president of Gateways to Better Education, suggests this eradication of non-Christian ideas must be supported by parents and educators who understand what he calls *biblical truths* as they relate to religion and public schools (1994).

Numerous issues have been brought forward by conservative Christian groups that question the constitutional separation of church and state. These groups sometimes want to impose their particular religious beliefs on their children's schools (Boston, 1993/1994; Molnar, 1993/1994; Sewall, 1999). In some cases children from these homes are encouraged to be disruptive influences to fight for their religious beliefs (Fege, 1993/1994; Marzano, 1993/1994, Pawson, 1998). For example, some children make a point to accuse their classmates of being evil if they do not believe as the accusers do (Benen, 1999). This kind of explosive rhetoric has understandably upset students, parents and educators. Attempts by school personnel to defuse religious conflicts have brought out cries from some parents that the schools are covering up perversion and paganism or that big government is causing the nation to decay morally and spiritually (Carnes, 1999; Ebert, 1993/1994).

The American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) under the leadership of Chief Counsel Jay Alan Sekulow argues against groups such as the ACLU, AU and the Interfaith Alliance. The ACLJ's stated purpose is to counteract what they believe is the ACLU's campaign against religious freedoms of Christians. Sekulow considers the situation a national emergency (2000).

Robert W. Pawson's Internet campaign called "Scriptures in Schools Project" is another example of a concerted effort to make sure the Christian theology is included in public schools. A week in September is designated for Christian students to take their Bibles to school and use them for school assignments. Public school teachers who are Christians are encouraged to use techniques (within the law) to get their religious message across in public schools which Pawson sees as "wide open mission fields" (Pawson, NP, 1998). He also provides a detailed approach to use everything from peer pressure to wearing certain clothing and accessories in preaching the Christian message.

One extremist group called the Southern League which is based in Tuscaloosa, Alabama goes as far as to advocate another attempt to secede from the Union. This group was founded by a group of college professors in 1991 and supposedly has a membership of 5,000 with chapters in every state of the former Confederate States of America. The main purpose of this organization is to preserve a Christian and Anglo-Celtic culture. A political session action within the existing system would be their means to achieve their ultimate goal—an overt Christian independent nation. They refer to the American Civil War of the 1860's as the First War for Southern Independence (Hill & Fleming, NP, 1995).

Proposed Compromises

Given the complexity of perspectives, some experts have offered policy suggestions that they hope will give religion a role in public schools without negating the 1st Amendment (e.g., Buehrer, 1994; Fraser, 1999; Haynes, 1990, 1991; Haynes & Thomas, 1998; Menendez, 1994). As a way of blending religion into the public schools,

Colleen Newquist suggests controversies over religious holidays are best resolved by ensuring that everything with religious content has educational value (1997). She encourages religion as appropriate for curriculum inclusion if it has academic justification. Yet some would question the wisdom of this approach. Can children stay emotionally removed from celebration? This cognitive assumption may be suspect. For example, Piaget's stage theory suggests that concrete thinking dominates children's intellectual ability until about twelve years of age (1948). If true, school teachers in elementary classrooms would have a great deal of difficulty keeping academics and celebration of religious holidays clearly defined. In addition, teachers themselves might also have trouble objectively teaching about religion (both others' faith and their own). *Knoxville News-Sentinel* columnist Terry Mattingly in an article entitled "Are religious studies classes making lessons too realistic?" reports that some teachers guide their students through actual rites and prayers of what he calls "foreign religions" (1998, p. B2). Although this practice is not very prevalent, he feels that this application of practices, even within an academic study of religion, raises problems.

In an article in *Educational Leadership* entitled "A Place at the Table" Michael Ebert argues that policies like the Williamsburg Charter can solve many state and church problems (1993/1994). This particular document presented in 1988 by leaders from various religious faiths and political positions attempts "to address the dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities posed by religious liberty in American public life today" (Haynes & Thomas, 1998, p. A1). The document was drafted to provide ways diversity could become a source of strength rather than an obstacle or weakness. The group sought

guiding principles that are found within the 1st Amendment of the United States Constitution. By working with the 1st Amendment these diverse groups sought ways they could reach agreements in developing “a common vision for the common good in public education” (Haynes, 1993-94, p. 32). Ebert writes that religious celebrations can present opportunities for public schools rather than problems (1993/1994).

Charles Haynes, noted scholar of the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, argues that people are becoming more sensitive to finding common ground on religious issues (1999). Yet this assertion is very difficult to document in any widely generalized way. Despite changes occurring as a result of specific minority protests, American history in the twentieth century has multiple examples of ongoing prejudice toward minority groups (Carrier, 1999). However, the work of Haynes and others within organizations like the Freedom Forum and Southern Poverty Law Center has indicated a general indication of an increase of tolerance towards the different people and beliefs in the United States. In the booklet *Ten Ways to Fight Hate: A Community Response Guide* Jim Carrier writes “all over the country people are fighting hate. Standing up to hate mongers. Promoting tolerance and inclusion. More often than not, when hate flares up, good erupts, too” (1999, p. 1). For example, the work of the Southern Poverty Law Center is a continuous battle in dealing with intolerance. They have found that most hate crimes are committed for reasons of bias towards a particular race or religion. They conclude that groups who learn to act “ from conscience and love, can neutralize bigotry” (Carrier, 1999, p. 1).

Educators' Responses to These Perspectives

To some degree, religious issues are complicated by each participant's religious or non-religious convictions on how public education should treat holidays like Christmas (American Association of School Administrators, 1964). Lack of religious tolerance often results in emotional conflicts within a school community (Benen, 1999). Limited legal knowledge on church and state topics adds tension and possible misunderstandings of what educators are legally able to provide for their students (e.g., Bates, 1993; Kramnick & Moore, 1999; Lynn, 1999; Marzano, 1993/1994; Menendez, 1994; Sizemore, 1994).

To address these issues, school boards, community groups, and nationally recognized religious groups have developed detailed guidelines to address the religious holidays in public schools' issue. In recent years, a number of educational and religious organizations have encouraged school officials to approach religious holidays from a purely academic perspective and to avoid religious devotions within public school programs. Teachers have been cautioned to recognize the differences between celebration *of* and teaching *about* religious holidays (Haynes, 1990; Menedez, 1999; Newquist, 1997). This distinction in the early 1960's on how public schools must approach religious holidays was clarified by the Commission on Religion in the Public Schools which cautioned policy-makers to remember "the non-Christian is not a guest in a Christian school—he is a fellow citizen in a public school which includes a good many Christian members" (American Association of School Administrators, 1964, p. 35).

In light of the sensitivity of issues raised by conservative religious groups, one educational historian suggests that perhaps Horace Mann's ideas of the "common school" should be reconsidered (Wright, 1999). This idea promoted by Mann in the early 1800's emphasized the importance of all children being taught values in a similar fashion. This societal mixture in the classroom of children from all economic and social levels would result in a community of adults who could work together to solve problems the community might encounter (Spring, 1996).

Another strategy is offered by Professor of Philosophy and Religion Fritz Detwiler. He urges the development of discussion groups which include critics of educational efforts to improve thinking skills. He stresses that diverse groups should use the democratic process with open discussions that recognizes opposing views. Detwiler believes that groups who intentionally avoid those with opposing view are not likely to solve controversial issues. His suggestions for open discussion and shared values provide some practical guidelines for schools to consider, but he also assumes people can reason clearly with others on emotionally charged matters such as religion (1993/94).

As one final suggestion, New York University Professor Joseph Viteritti suggests the answer to the inequities of education (including religion) is school choice (1999). He feels today's children of low income parents should be allowed to attend private religious schools of their choice financed by the government since the children who have parents of wealth already have this option. However, the acceptance of ideas like Viteritti's would be a departure from the Supreme Court's interpretations of the First and Fourteenth Amendments of the Constitution (Alexander & Alexander, 1998; Sianjina,

1999; Urofsky, 1990). The use of school choice might resolve conflicts over issues such as prayer or holiday activities but could undermine the historical principles of public education (Fowler-Finn, 1993/1994; Glickman, 1998).

The Challenges to Educators

A careful study of the court cases dealing with church and state conflicts may explain why some teachers avoid teaching about religion rather than risk legal action or misinterpretation of their lessons. However, if students are to receive a complete education, educators must reach some sort of reconciliation between church and state. Instead of skirting religious issues, educators should recognize that curricula can include teaching about religion if information is framed as honest discussions of the cultural and historical significance of different beliefs (Kramnick & Moore, 1999). As a result, the principles of religious freedom could become a shared community commitment to have open and honest dialogue about religious issues.

James W. Fraser, a history of education professor at Northeastern University, focuses on stopping the conservative religious right from using religion as a tool. His goal is to find ways to deal with religion by promoting tolerance of a diverse population. He does not directly defend religion in schools, but tries to find ways to make its inclusion legal and productive in a multi-cultural America (1999). This sort of harmony is probably too idealistic a goal, but it still may be possible for schools to establish an educational program recognizing the value of cultural diversity in the United States (Banfield, 1995; Lowe & Swink, 2000; Paterson, 1999). Yet the risk of oversimplification is emphasized by scholars like Stephen L. Carter who suggests that

“secular liberals” underestimate the large number of religious people who feel America’s religious traditions are being threatened. He emphasizes his own beliefs by saying, “I strongly defend the separation of church and state, but insist that it is possible to maintain that crucial separation while treating religious beliefs with respect, and treating religious believers as something other than irrational” (p. 16, 1993).

In order to manage the implementation of judicial findings, educators need to be better trained in what has actually been decided but must also be aware of local customs which may be in conflict with these judicial decisions (Peach & Reddick, 1995; Sisemore, 1994). Therefore, church and state issues will continue to be very problematic for educators and for the larger community. These difficulties should not, however, deter people from trying to reach a workable balance between the concerns of religion and the needs of the state (American Association of School Administrators, 1964; Haynes & Thomas, 1998).

Noted Stanford University professor Nel Noddings perhaps says it best in that “parents must not be allowed to prevent the school from doing its work to develop intelligence” (p. 41, 1994). The teaching of tolerance and the respect of entitlements of others is a very important responsibility for teachers. However, public school leaders must take religion seriously (Nord, 1995) or be prepared for criticism from numerous groups that have organized and are ready to assert their positions (e.g., Boston, 1993; Buehrer & Doerr, 1996; Haynes & Thomas, 1998; Marzano, 1993/1994; Scheuerer, 1990; Simonds, 1993/1994).

CHAPTER III

METHODS

This study on the impact of the religious holiday Christmas on elementary school leadership was conducted using interviews, observations and an analysis of pertinent documents. A qualitative research technique, the comparative case study approach (Creswell, 1994), was used to describe the four schools as they compared with the incidents that are described in the introduction (pp. 1-5).

Community and colleague reactions as well as attitudes and experiences in reflecting upon the incidents that principals face with Christmas issues, provided data in the discovery process of the study. Archival data (i.e., pictures and descriptions of bulletin board Christmas displays) were examined to analyze the potential religious and state conflicts. Patterns of similarity and dissimilarity from elementary school administrators, staff, parents and community leaders were collected from open-ended interviews. Cross-case analysis of the four school sites' materials and descriptions were placed in one of two categories—secular or religious. Secular materials included items such as Santa Claus, reindeer, snow flakes, bells, wreaths and trees. Religious materials included items such as nativity scenes, candy canes, stained glass windows and angels. The analytical process examining bulletin board and display information concerning legal, emotional and rational thinking on Christmas and elementary public schools was used to help triangulate “a broader range of historical, attitudinal, and behavioral issues” (Yin, 1994, p. 92).

The triangulation of collected data helped address *trustworthiness* issues. The use of multiple methods and multiple sources of data established a chain of evidence highlighting the Christmas dilemma. Pertinent data were analyzed to identify patterns and build explanations of this church and state phenomenon that has the potential to occur in other elementary schools. All of these activities are an effort to insure *credibility* as the naturalistic inquiry process increases the probability of trustworthiness of the results.

Transferability of the study's findings is the major goal of researcher's efforts. Thick description of the phenomena was provided in an effort to allow readers enough information about the Christmas dilemma in these cases to help in determining the extent to which findings from the cases transfer to other situations. This part of the study examined whether or not the events of the introductory story of Foothills School were unique or whether the same explosive religious fervor exists in other elementary schools just waiting for the right incident to erupt into a major controversy.

Interview

Participants

Four public elementary schools participated fully in the study—Foothills in Maryville, Tennessee (researcher's school—FH), an additional East Tennessee school (ET), and two North Midwestern schools (MWSC and MWSD). The research sites involved three separate school systems. Full participation involved participant interviews and a campus visit. One other school in the Northeast (NE) initially agreed to participate, but subsequently would not allow a campus visit or audio-taped interviews. The information that was obtained from the Northeastern school is classified as additional

information in Chapter IV. These data were obtained by phone interviews, faxes, e-mails and the U.S. Mail Service. A sixth school in a central Midwestern state had initially agreed to participate, but its participation was subsequently rejected by its Central Office. The rejection was based in part on the September 11, 2001 terrorists' attack as well as a previous problem with Halloween activities that had occurred at the targeted school.

In the four fully participating schools interviewing was used to explore the participants' experiences of the Christmas dilemma cultural and policy information lenses. Two elementary schools were selected for their location in the southeastern part of the United States (*Bible Belt* region). Two others were selected from a school system in a North Midwestern state more centrally located in the United States. The principals were interviewed both for their views on the type of events that occurred at Foothills Elementary School as well as for their own school experiences with Christmas. This information provided insight into the extent of intensity or lack of intensity of the Christmas dilemma as a problem for elementary principals in different regions of the United States. These individuals had unique perspectives to share from their own experiences and observations.

Other individuals from the school population of the two selected regional areas provided their knowledge and opinions on Christmas and their public elementary school. These individuals included parents, teachers and religious leaders. The principals of the schools in the study selected the teachers and parents who provided data. These persons agreed to participate based on their willingness to share their opinions on how Christmas should be handled in public elementary schools. Three religious leaders (Protestant,

Catholic, and Jewish) who had a connection with the Foothills community in East Tennessee were asked to participate. These religious leaders provided opinions on how Christmas should be included or excluded within the public school curriculum. One religious leader outside of the Southeast was selected for his interest in state and church issues. His participation was sought and obtained by one of the school leaders who participated in the study.

The 1999 Maryville City School Board Chairman Oliver “Buzz” Thomas was also interviewed for his role as a key player in the events that took place at Foothills Elementary. His credentials as a lawyer, ordained Protestant minister, and author as well as his experience in working with church and state issues throughout the United States provided an important dimension to the study.

Finally, Dr. Charles Haynes, a noted professor and author on church and state issues, was interviewed by phone. Dr. Haynes is the Senior Scholar of the 1st Amendment Center based in Washington, D.C. The 1st Amendment Center is funded by the Freedom Forum which is described in its brochure as “a nonpartisan, international foundation dedicated to free press, free speech and free spirit for all.” Interviewing Dr. Haynes made it possible to obtain a more comprehensive view of what is happening in public schools around the nation.

In summary, the Foothills’ participant population included 2 male administrators with a leadership experience range of 2 to 22 years. Both leaders are members of a Protestant church. The five FH-interviewed teachers were all female and were all members of some Protestant denomination. Their years of teaching experience ranged

from 2 to 30 years. The ET school administrators included a male principal and a female assistant principal with 25 and 17 years of experience respectively. They were members of a Protestant church. The five all female ET teachers who were interviewed have a teaching experience ranged of 18 to 30 years. They too were all members of Protestant churches. The two Midwestern schools' principals included one male with 6 years of leadership experience and one female with 4 years of leadership experience. The male leader marked "Other" for his religious category while his colleague checked Protestant. The five Midwestern teachers (4 females and 1 male) had a teaching experiences ranging from 6 to 36 years. Their religious classification included three Protestants, one Catholic and one Muslim. The school in the Northeast that provided additional information included one principal with 8 years of experience who checked that he was of the Catholic faith. Additionally, the NE school had two assistant principals with one male (Catholic) with 2 years of leadership experience and one female (Protestant) with 4 years leadership experience. The three NE teachers were two females (both Catholic) and one male (Protestant) with teaching experience ranging from 4 to 30 years.

Procedure

An open-ended questioning technique was used with each person interviewed. An informed consent document was signed by each interviewee (Appendix A). These interview sessions were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Additionally, member checks were utilized to insure accuracy of the information obtained through interviews. Sharan B. Merriam defines this process as "taking data and tentative interpretations back to the people from whom they were derived and asking them if the results are plausible"

(1998, p. 204). Copies of the transcribed interviews were given back to each participant for their approval of content and presentation. Four participants asked for minor changes to soften some of the terms that they felt did not really describe their true feelings.

The interview questions focused on the ways public elementary school administrators (Appendix B), teachers (Appendix C), parents (Appendix D), and religious leaders (Appendix E) react to how Christmas should be addressed in public schools. Sets of interview questions were also designed for Oliver Thomas (Appendix F) and Dr. Charles Haynes (Appendix G).

Elementary school leaders' opinions on how they see their role in dealing with church and state issues such as Christmas are key to the study's story. One school leaders' question asked whether or not each interviewee believed a local school policy on religious holidays helped or hindered public school's holiday activities. A question was also included on whether or not there is any need for in-service training in dealing with religious issues. Another part of the interview explored the school leaders' knowledge on dealing with members of the school staff who have attempted to proselytize a particular religion. For example, the participants were asked if they were aware of any public school teachers who have attempted to promote a particular religion. Additionally, the interviewees' opinions were probed on whether they felt the personal religious background of the public school personnel influences how much or how little religious holidays were allowed to play in a given public school. Finally, elementary school leaders were asked questions aimed at getting to their core beliefs of how they felt about the importance of Christmas in public schools.

Teachers were asked a variety of questions to get their views on where they rated Christmas in their classroom challenges. Other questions examined their knowledge and concerns about the legal aspects of Christmas as a state and church issue. Also, questions were asked to see how teachers deal with criticism regarding religion in schools.

Parents from the two different geographical areas provided their views on how they felt Christmas was being handled at their child's public elementary school. Additional information was also provided by seven Northeastern parents who answered the interview questions in writing and then either faxed, mailed or e-mailed their responses to the researcher. Parents were questioned on their own observations and experiences with Christmas in their children's 'schools as well as their opinions on the appropriate response to the holiday within public schools.

Four religious leaders provided their opinions on how they felt Christmas should be approached in public elementary schools. Questions were asked about whether or not Christmas should be included in any form as an elementary school activity. These religious leaders were also asked if they felt public elementary schools should incorporate information about different religious groups into curriculum.

An interview with the former chairman of the Maryville City School Board Oliver "Buzz" Thomas provided a number of answers to questions that related directly to the Christmas dilemma that occurred at Foothills Elementary School in December of 1999. He was asked his views on how he personally reacted to the criticism in the local newspaper that was promoted by the Concerned Christian group. He was also asked

whether or not he felt a school system should have a local school board policy in dealing with religious issues like Christmas.

Dr. Charles Haynes was asked about the need for a local school board policy. His opinion on the type of in-service training for educational staff was probed. Questions about where he placed the importance of the inclusion of studying religious diversity was addressed. He was also asked what advice he had for elementary school leaders to prevent controversies from erupting over issues like Christmas.

Archival Data

A number of letters written about the Christmas dilemma and sent to the local newspaper editor and the Foothills principal were used to obtain background data that highlighted the controversy as well as potential solutions. A number of newspaper articles that directly addressed the Foothills controversy also provided information.

Letters and phone calls received by the chairman of the Maryville City Board of Education were discussed in his interview. This information helped the researcher have a deeper understanding of the chairman's views on Christmas and public schools that he had presented for a local newspaper article during the controversy at Foothills. This data offered another perspective on the explosive reactions that can erupt from some individuals and groups.

Letters from Foothills parents and other community members (at the time of the incident) to the Foothills principal were analyzed as a means of inclusion of parental viewpoints on the Christmas controversy. This data collection included both positive and negative reactions to the principal's suggestion to his staff to be more sensitive to non-

Christian students at Foothills. The researcher opted to use these materials for examining the parental viewpoints rather than by surveying FH parents through questionnaires. This collection of materials avoided any potential feeling by parents of being coerced to support a particular point of view by an individual (researcher/principal of Foothills) who had a position of power over their children's educational program.

In addition, religious pamphlets, posters, newspaper and magazine material sent to Foothills offered additional viewpoints that were incorporated into the different groups' data materials. These documents provided background information about the individual's or groups' ideas about church and state issues.

Photographs of bulletin boards and hallway displays in Foothills Elementary and ET Schools were also taken. Oral descriptions by staff and parents of the other selected public elementary schools were also obtained to be used in the comparative phase of the study. The schools in this study provided data that were either recorded [digital computer photographs] during the Christmas season or described by those who participated and observed a particular school during this time period. These artifacts and descriptions were analyzed and examined to help establish a level of support or lack of support by the schools of the religious holiday Christmas. Presence or absence of presentation of cultural sensitivity was discovered through analyzing the types of bulletin board displays put up by teachers. Therefore, a story of how each school staff treated Christmas was visually and descriptively obtained. Cultural ideas were observed through pictorial or descriptive means. The examination of school photographs of holiday phenomena

provided insight into patterns and the direction of the community's church and state thinking.

Finally, how each school was decorated during Christmas and other religious holidays suggested the value given to a particular religious point of view. The projection of religious beliefs was generated not only through bulletin board displays in classrooms and hallways, but also through decorations such as wreaths hung for display on the outside of the building. These visual presentations were very effective means of presenting particular holiday concepts. The patterns of a school's Christmas displays through bulletin boards, decorated trees, art projects, and other visual media suggested a curriculum study or even an overt celebration of a religious holiday. Religious biases of school leaders and staff can be interpreted from these visual presentations.

An analysis of Christmas displays and decorations of teachers provided another dimension of the Christmas dilemma case study. These analyzed materials helped provide a picture of how some teachers opted to present Christmas to their students. The implication of whether a curriculum study or religious celebration was promoted can be argued. The church and state complexities of Christmas and public schools suggested the existence of an underlying dilemma for public educators who work in schools with populations containing diverse religious backgrounds.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of the religious holiday Christmas on the leadership of four elementary schools. Fifty-five individuals (including the researcher) provided data through interview and the questionnaire processes. Included in the total data are 13 individuals from the Northeast who provided data, but are restricted to being classified as additional information for the overall study and not based on an eyewitness account. This eliminates NE classification as a full case description

Forty-two of the fully participating participants were from one of the three school systems designated in the case study (two systems in Tennessee and one system from the Midwestern part of the United States). The forty-third participant was Dr. Charles C. Haynes who gave a phone interview to the researcher. Clarifications and/or follow-up questions by the interviewer are included in brackets within the quoted interviews.

Christmas Phenomena in Three School Systems

Foothills Elementary School, Maryville, Tennessee: Case Description #1

Opened in 1995, Foothills Elementary School (FH) is located in Maryville, Tennessee. Foothills' demographics matches the overall Maryville System which includes 93.2% Caucasians, 3.1% Black, 1% Hispanic and 2.7% Asian. The per pupil expenditure is \$7,261, \$1,195 more than the state average. In 2000 the school was reorganized from a preK-5th grade into a preK-4th pattern. The student population is 460. The campus since 2000-01 is shared with the system-wide Intermediate School made up

of 5th and 6th grade students with a population of 700. The Foothills staff has 39 certified professionals and 23 paraprofessionals. Full-time specialists in art, music and physical education are provided. The school has one full-time administrator and a part-time assistant principal who also serves as the school's technology specialist.

During the 2001 Christmas season, the first decorations most would note were four very large wreaths with bows hanging on the outer wall of the front of the building. Generally, one could see numerous secular decorations with the shopping mall Christmas appearance being displayed throughout the school. Each classroom had put up Christmas trees with handmade student decorations. Numerous paper wreaths had been hung as art projects created by the children. Children's artwork with secular Christmas themes was also located throughout the building. Bulletin boards with themes of "Happy Holidays," snowflakes, snowmen and a great number of Santas were on display. One had a display entitled "Christmas Around the World." Another bulletin board featured a variety of religious holidays such as Hanukkah and Kwanzaa. Only one bulletin board had the message "Merry Christmas."

Secular Christmas music was playing through the intercom system in the hallways, restrooms and the cafeteria. A holiday musical concert was held in early December with both religious and secular music. Students also sang both religious as well as secular music in their music classes. One Junior Service League poster that was displayed near the office presented the theme: "Every Child Deserves A Happy Holiday." This poster had been changed since 1999 when it read "No Child Should Go Without at Christmas."

Administrators. As the researcher, study participant and principal of Foothills School, I have a singular part in this case study. As I have alluded to in earlier chapters, my role serves in many ways as collector, observer, interpreter and scribe to this unfolding story about Christmas and public elementary school leaders.

Both my assistant principal and I believe that since the Maryville School System does not have a policy dealing with religious holidays we are left with a difficult site-based decision-making role in dealing with holidays like Christmas. Generally, we interpret and attempt to follow state and federal laws that emphasize religious holidays should not be celebrated, but can be studied. The assistant principal said it this way: “Since our school board does not address religious holidays, each school must deal with the how in addressing this subject. Our school focuses more on secular traditions than religious.” As principal I have to agree that this tends to keep us out of most controversies. I also totally agree with his comment: “The Maryville City School Board would help us eliminate many potential problems if they enacted a policy on dealing with religion. Such a policy should include how we should address religious holidays.” I, too, feel a policy would provide better guidelines that could mean more consistency as we face problems created by religious differences throughout our school system.

Even though there is no clearly stated board policy, the Maryville City School system has, in fact, provided cultural diversity training for all principals. This has also been offered to the system’s secondary teaching staffs, but as of yet has not been provided to elementary assistant principals or teachers. Our system needs to expand this training. The assistant principal brought up this issue in our discussion on special training

when he stated, “Very little training has been provided on religion or dealing with diversity for the elementary school staffs. The only workshop that I remember was provided only for administrators and that I believe was at least two years ago.” We both believe teachers at Foothills as well as other Maryville elementary school staffs could benefit from in-service training dealing with religion. This training may prevent teachers from making mistakes with state and church issues that may occur as the population in Maryville becomes more diverse.

Whether or not Maryville City Schools is using an effective approach to religious issues can easily be questioned. Leaving it up to each school staff to establish procedures on religious issues causes too many inconsistencies that can result in a fragmented approach to very explosive topics. Understandably, however, the board may prefer to delay the establishment of a local policy on religious issues rather than stir up a potentially emotional outburst from groups in the community. In place of a specific policy, the Maryville School Board has, however, enacted a Character Education program that is an excellent model for promoting sensitivity, but still does not touch religious issues in much depth. Yet FH’s assistant principal pointed out that “Our system’s approach at this time does appear to be working and rates at least a ‘satisfactory’ by parents and students alike.” The assistant principal also explained his thoughts on where he felt we were at this time in dealing with religious issues such as Christmas:

Currently, I believe we address Christmas appropriately. However, I can see where problems can be created if our staff loses sensitivity. I could see some of our staff members stepping across the line without too much thought on what they were doing.

Both the assistant principal and I feel more direct action must eventually be taken to stop the overt breaking of state and church separation issues. We both agree, however, that controversies with teachers who may have stepped across the line and proselytize a particular religion should be dealt with privately. The assistant principal perhaps explained this best when he said, "Yes, action must be taken. I would discuss the situation in private and hopefully, resolve the problem." If counseling does not solve the problem, a second step that could lead to disciplinary action toward the employee might be necessary. Dismissal of an employee would, of course, be the last resort and sought only if the employee refused to stop promoting his or her religious beliefs. All of these possibilities impact numerous aspects of the leadership for myself and the assistant principal.

As principal I feel some of the staff at Foothills do have a tendency to take at least half-steps across the church and state line. This can be observed in the way they freely offer their religious viewpoints as witnessed by the overtly religious decorations that end up on their December bulletin boards and in their classrooms.

Trying to promote greater sensitivity towards a culturally diverse group at Foothills obviously caused a negative reaction in December of 1999 (as described in earlier chapters) from a conservative Christian group. Some leadership problems did result, even if nothing more than dealing with the discomfort of being targeted by a group who wrote critical letters to the editor of the local newspaper. These criticisms had as a main theme that public schools should not be trying to be more sensitive to non-Christian students. Since I had been the one to promote the idea for my staff to be more sensitive to

non-Christians, I naturally took the brunt of criticism. Actually, some positive results did come from efforts to promote sensitivity toward religiously diverse groups. The staff openly discussed the issues and became more united to being more sensitive in the future to diverse groups. My assistant principal also felt it would not hurt to discuss and train the staff and perhaps even broaden the concept of sensitivity towards non-Christians within the community. He added, “ I don’t see any major problems from promoting more sensitivity. I would expect problems if we completely banned religious holidays.”

Deciding whether or not one’s religious background helps or hurts the leadership role in a public elementary school requires some careful reflection. My own religious background, I personally feel, helps me to be a better leader. However, I strongly believe I must be careful not to promote my religious beliefs while serving as a public official. Even though one cannot take his or her religion off at the school door like a jacket, still it is possible to keep from overtly promoting one’s religious beliefs. The way I react to my job and go about daily routines is, I hope, a nonverbal testimony of how I view life. On the other hand, the assistant principal related:

I don’t believe it hinders or helps. I have strong religious convictions and beliefs; however, I believe church and state issues should remain separate. I do not believe anyone should be allowed to religiously influence children in a public and state forum.

The impact of a religious holiday like Christmas tests leadership teams in what they allow or disallow staff members to do. A long-term negative impact on the leadership may occur if teachers are not given clear guidance to keep from accidentally or even purposely blurring the separation of state and church.

Teachers. All five FH teachers (FHT1-FHT5) interviewed expressed that they did not feel Christmas created any major problems in their classrooms:

FHT1: Christmas does not create problems for my teaching assignments. I probably have a different perspective than a lot of the teachers in this school since I taught and was taught in a Northern area. I lived and taught in a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio, in a predominately Jewish area, so we were encouraged to have respect for other religions and other holidays. So Christmas was never pushed by itself—we were always encouraged to wish people “Happy Holidays.” What I like to do is include Jewish customs in my December lesson plans. I also include Spanish customs. This has never been a problem for me here.

FHT2: It has not at this point and I have only taught for two years. As far as I know we talk about different religions and celebrations that go on at Christmas time. So we don’t really stick to one particular thought [religious holiday]. So it has not caused me any problem in my classroom at this point. Parents have never said anything to me.

FHT3: During my whole teaching career I haven’t had problems created during Christmas time. They get really excited and I think children today are more into the commercial aspects. We do not do just Christmas, but we talk about Hanukkah and the Spanish holidays. Usually the *Weekly Reader* has a whole section on different holidays from different countries and different religions. That’s when we talk about that the most. As far as any problems, I have never had any parents to ask and, of course, I’ve never had any Jewish children. So I haven’t had any problems. [Have you ever had any members of Jehovah’s Witnesses?] No, I haven’t. When I was at another school we had one in that school, but I did not have that child.

FHT4: Christmas does not create any classroom problems. I look forward to the excitement that is generated by the children. No, I haven’t had any problems with that [Christmas in the classroom]. I mainly try not to teach anything that could create a problem with Christmas or concerning Christmas. I have never had anybody say anything about anything that’s been done in the classroom as far as Christmas books that we read or anything. [Do you try to include the religious Christmas story?] Yes, over the past few years I’ve done more of that. When I was teaching in the 2nd grade we did Christmas around the world—we did quite a few [studying different countries’ holidays]. In 1st grade we’ve not had that many [opportunities]—now last year we happened to get a *Weekly Reader* that was good. It had Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, and two others that I can’t remember what they were, but it was perfect at the time. [Do you feel comfortable giving the meaning of the Christian Christmas?] I do, but I don’t usually do that myself unless it

comes up with the children or from something we are reading. Then I feel comfortable with it. [Student directed?] Yes.

FHT5: Not usually unless, for example, one year I knew I had a Jewish child in the classroom—actually a couple of years I have known I had a Jewish child in the classroom. Most of the kids themselves are so predominantly Christian that they bring up things about Jesus in Community Circle [classroom discussion time]. They also bring up biblical teachings from Sunday School or even Bible verses that they're learning in Sunday School. When they bring it up and I'm aware that I have a student who is Jewish, then I have to take that into consideration and we have to talk about that. Normally, as a rule it's not a problem unless the children themselves bring up the theology part of it. I'm much more aware of it since we had our reaction to the Toys for Tots poster [some concern raised in 1999 over the Christmas content of the Junior League' campaign poster]. And we've become more culturally diverse lately; that makes you think about it.

The awareness projected by the FH teachers that Christmas does not normally create a problem but has the potential to cause problems should be of assistance to the leadership team's efforts. This attitude is better than being naïve and lulled into an explosive situation like the one that occurred at FH in 1999. Christmas controversies can occur suddenly from what may be an effort to achieve a better school environment.

The FH five interviewed teachers had differing views on whether or not the majority religion (Christianity) gets any extra attention at their school:

FHT1: There is no question that the majority religion of our area gets extra attention in our school. Christianity definitely gets more attention in this area. There is not a question that it does. I think for some people who have only lived in a predominantly Christian area that they forget or don't realize that there are people who celebrate different holidays and religions. You have got to have lived elsewhere to understand. If you only know one thing—you're not going to be able to see anything else.

FHT2: No, I don't think that any religion gets extra attention at our school.

FHT3: No, but you know it may be because I have grown up here in this area and I'm just used to it and don't really think about it. I don't think there is any extra attention. Now there are things that will be in the newspaper—they have the faith

and religious section. But as far as pertaining that into the schools—no, I don't think so. I guess the minority religions here prevent this—just because of legal threats. I've not had any non-Christian children that I know of since I've been here.

FHT4: The majority religion in my opinion is hurt because of the minority. Well, I don't know that Christianity gets extra attention. I guess—I don't know—when I looked over this my first thought was that the majority religion is hurt because of the minority. But I don't know in the school setting that it's a problem. It's not discussed [the Christian religion]—at least I don't think it is—I don't see that in the classroom. Mainly because we're not teaching that [Christian religious issues] in the classroom.

FHT5: I taught for three years in Maryland before moving here and my children were in 1st grade—well, one was in 1st grade in a suburb of Washington, D.C. The only songs that they were allowed to sing at Christmas time were “Frosty,” “Jingle Bells,” and “Rudolph.” When we moved back here one of my daughters—and, of course, I was thrilled with this—the fact is that one of them was in the 1st grade and they actually had Bible stories read in the classroom. I couldn't get over that—I asked my daughter, “Now are you sure?” and she said “Oh, yeah, it was a story about Jonah.” I thought well, gosh, I'm getting private school education without having to pay for it. Because a lot of Christians where we had moved from put their children in private schools to get that kind of education and here it was happening [in a public school]. Any kind of songs they would sing [were Christian influenced]—definitely I think the majority religion gets extra attention. Because they [people from the local area] just don't think otherwise. Until recently we hadn't had to think otherwise, but now that we are growing [more diverse groups moving into the community] we kind of have to do that.

Obviously some of the FH teachers feel Christianity is getting an advantage at FH that could result in creating a state and church conflict. Others seemed to speculate that the Christians are at some disadvantage because of minority demands. This conflict in the ranks could create some problems for the FH leaders.

Some of the FH teachers felt it was not their responsibility to teach about any religion. But others believed that religion should be included where it was pertinent to understanding some part of the history of the nation.

FHT1: I don't feel that I am teaching religion as I do not discuss doctrine, merely holiday customs. No, I really don't feel like it's my responsibility as I have said before to teach religion. But I do discuss the holidays because I want children to be aware of that there are other holidays, customs and that there are other religions in the world. But I don't think it's my responsibility to teach religion, but it is my responsibility to teach respect and tolerance for others.

FHT2: As far as teaching about any religion—I was taught in college to hold back from doing anything religious. Of course, if children bring up anything and they want to discuss something—I let them discuss it. So none of my opinions are brought on them at all. [Are there any classroom materials that you use to help with dealing with holidays?] In the *Weekly Readers* it [religion] is generalized and it will say “so and so in this area” like Hanukkah—they'll say [*Weekly Reader* writers] kind of what they [religious groups] do—different celebrations that they might have. But it does not go into why or how they [religious holiday celebrations] came about. With Thanksgiving in different books and things like that—we will talk about why the Pilgrims left—that they didn't have religious freedom. So that's as far as it goes.

FHT3: I don't make a conscious effort I guess to do that, but maybe subconsciously—part of it—maybe if you're reading a book and it alludes to some kind of religious belief or whatever. Now 1st graders—they will ask a lot of questions. If they bring something up about religion or ask a question, I'll answer it. But as far as teaching any kind of religious study in my classroom—no—nor do I have big discussions on religion with 1st graders. I'm not sure that they are mature enough to understand all of this. Now I guess the biggest time we've talked about any type of religion would be when we do sections in our *Weekly Readers* about the different celebrations in the holidays with the different religions. We do talk about that, and my main goal with that is that the children need to learn that there are different celebrations for different religions—not just for Christianity. Maybe that's not what they believe, and that's fine, but they need to respect other people's beliefs. I think with 1st graders—they understand that to a point, but that's okay if others celebrate Hanukkah; that's their belief—just like we celebrate Christmas, and that's all right.

FHT4: I don't—mainly because I not confident enough in knowing the beliefs of other religions to do that. I don't think it would be fair for me to do that to the children because of the lack of enough knowledge about other religions. There is not anything in the curriculum that I've seen that would include religion.

FHT5: Well, I did one unit on World War II and that, of course, includes the Holocaust and the way the Jewish people were treated. We talk about why the Jewish people were singled out; of course, Hitler was looking for an scapegoat.

We also talk about what the Jewish people, in general, believe that is different from “what many of you believe.” The idea is that they [Jewish people] are still waiting for the Messiah to come. [I tell my students] the idea of how hard it would be to believe that this person was the son of God—when they grew up with him. That would be like believing that this boy you are sitting next to is the Son of God. He is a mighty good person, but who is going to believe? So for the Jewish people it has been hard to believe that [Jesus is the Son of God]. So in that regard—yes, I’ve brought up other religions.

Since the Maryville School System does not include the study of religion in their elementary school curriculum, the FH teachers’ attitude on excluding religious study from curriculum does not really impact the FH leaders at this time.

The five FH teacher interviewees had different interpretations of whether or not they had any legal concerns over the way they dealt with Christmas in their classrooms:

FHT1: Do I feel that I’m legally limited in dealing with religious holidays? Not here because I’ve known of people who read Bible verses in classrooms. So I don’t feel that there are any limitations. I feel like there should be [legal limitations] to protect other people. But I don’t feel there are legal limitations—and you have always been open. I feel like there should be legal limitations—I feel strongly that there should be legal limitations to protect Christians as well as anybody else. So I feel that to protect all of us there should be legal limitations on inclusion of and promotion of only one religion—whether it be Christianity or Judaism.

FHT2: I haven’t had specific college course work on legal limitation as far as state and church, but through discussions I have talked some about it [state and church issues]. It is pretty much common knowledge to keep to yourself your specific opinions as far as religion—you don’t want to force that on anybody. [Do we need any church and state in-service?] It could possibly help for situations that have gotten out of hand. I don’t feel legally limited—it’s more of a personal choice to stay out of trouble.

FHT3: Yes, I guess—I don’t include any religious aspects—I guess I’ve got sense enough to know if you get into a lot of religious issues—you can get into trouble with it. I will say this when I first started teaching school a long time ago back in the mid-70’s every morning we read a Bible story—our whole school did this. We just read it and that was it. At that point in time if it was Monday morning I would ask, “How many of you went to Sunday school yesterday and did you learn

anything?" I don't do that anymore because of just the things that have happened. Through all the years you get to the point where you say, "I better not do this anymore." You could get called on the carpet for this. A little legally limited—I kind of know where my families are coming from. [Did the Bible reading just stop?] We didn't have a Bible reading—we had like a storybook approach with Bible stories. By 1981 we had stopped that. We had been kind of told from the Central Office—not directly, but sort of an undercurrent that this may become an issue we probably need to stop. This, of course, was in another school system.

FHT4: Just as I have previously mentioned I don't have the confidence or knowledge to make proper comments about the legal aspects of teaching about religion and religious holidays. I have some knowledge on legal limitations, but I don't feel real strongly because again I don't feel I know enough about the others to say I could actually teach enough about all of them and I feel if I'm going to teach about one I need to teach about all. Mainly because of my own children if they were in the classroom and they were being taught a religion I would want to make sure that they hear them all and not just theirs.

FHT5: As far as being legally limited—I do whatever is necessary to teach big issues—World War II and discrimination are big issues and to just understand how this is one group of people [Jews] who were discriminated against because their beliefs were different. I think it's important to understand that. And I think it is important in the religious aspect for them to understand that there are other views out there that are different than theirs. If you're not in the majority a lot of times you get discriminated against. I think in that way it is okay to teach about different religions. Sometimes kids just bring up things that cause us to have to talk about religion. [How about the 9/11 situation and Muslims?] We did a little bit. But we did it not so much then, but later on when we got into the World War II thing. Then we brought up the Muslim/Islamic beliefs and tied it in kind of in that way. Because at the time [September 11, 2001] they were too young and weren't catching the religious aspect of it at all—just terrorists. And were they [terrorists] going to come and get us? That was their concern.

FH leaders must acknowledge that some of their teachers' lack of legal information on state and church issues could result in problems with some segments of the community.

FH teachers were not aware of any criticisms about the way they approached

Christmas in their classrooms:

FHT1: I am not aware of any criticism about the way I approach December holidays, but you may be aware of negative feelings from some of my parents.

[No one has criticized your approach to Christmas to me.] So far I have not been aware of any. I took it in the first person and thought just about [criticism] of myself. [So let's expand that a little—are you aware of others who are criticized for their approach to Christmas?] I think that there have been a very limited number of teachers who may be criticized for that, but for the most part because it is such a strong Christian area—people are not criticized.

FHT2: No, I never have had any criticism—none of my parents or children have ever said anything to me about anything we have done [at Christmas]. They seem to enjoy the time.

FHT3: No, if someone has been unhappy with it—they've never told me. In all the years I have taught and the past two years since I have been here, I haven't had any criticism. No one has said anything.

FHT4: I haven't had any criticisms. I had a parent last year that brought things in—one about Abraham Lincoln and religious issues. She brought something at Christmas and Easter showing how you can [incorporate religion into the classroom] without actually calling it religion. I don't know where that pamphlet was from. I'm sure you've seen them too. Those were my Christmas and Easter cards from that parent. I did read them—I really didn't do anything with it, but I did read it. She brought one for every holiday [Christian]. Now I don't remember anything around Halloween, but I do remember Christmas, Presidents—just Abraham Lincoln, and Easter. It wasn't a criticism, and she never said anything about it—she just sent it in with her son. He gave them to me to read and didn't push it in anyway—just sent it for my information. She handled it well.

FHT5: I haven't, but I think about it more—well, I've always thought about it a little bit since I moved from another area, but after our experience a couple years ago I try to think about it even more. Although if I know I have a Jewish child or a child of a particular faith, that is quite different; you have to think about it.

The fact that this group of FH teachers did not interpret some parents' actions as bordering on being criticism of their approach to Christmas may or may not be a good sign to the FH leaders. After all, a teacher's letter on having a Christmas party in 1999 resulted in the original FH Christmas dilemma. Sometimes comments or actions by parents may not be seen by the educational staff as being of a critical nature, but in actuality may negatively impact the school's learning environment. The FH leaders need

to be careful to keep the entire staff alert to criticism that may come from disgruntled individuals or groups in the community.

The teachers at FH were unanimous in their responses in that they do not remember in all their years of teaching any incidents where parents questioned the inclusion or lack of inclusion in aspect of Christmas and their classrooms:

FHT1: No, parents have never mentioned that to me.

FHT2: No, as I have said I'm not aware of any criticism from my parents. They actually get quite involved in Christmas crafts and things like that. I actually call mine a "Winter Celebration" where we just spend the day doing different craft projects which would then be gifts for parents. I have parents who come and help with this as well. We might have a little snack, and most of the time the parents are the ones who do most of that too. They plan it and bring the stuff in. So I'm really not involved in it [the party] at all except to be there making sure that the children are manageable. [Do you have activities?] At the "Winter Celebration" we really don't—maybe coloring pages or puzzles with Christmas cards that are cut up—just little stuff. We don't really play any games or anything like that. We don't discuss any religious things.

FHT3: No, they've never done that. I have never had anybody even question what I have done at Christmas or any holiday. So far I haven't. FHT4: No, but I wondered when I got those pamphlets [holiday cards given by a parent about how to incorporate religion legally into the classroom] from her last year. Maybe she was questioning that I was not doing enough. But she never said anything. I've never had anybody question me. I'm sure [the purpose of the pamphlets] was that she wanted more. But again she didn't say anything. But it's implied in the reading of them.

FTH5: I haven't at all. I haven't had any feedback. I make an effort to say holiday party or celebration. Parents—many of them will come to me and say "Christmas oh—I can't say Christmas can I?" So I try to avoid just saying Christmas, and they'll come back to me and use the word and laugh. Many of them will—so far.

Some of the FH interviewed teachers were confused about whether a local policy existed concerning how they should deal with religion:

FHT1: I'm not aware of our local policy's effectiveness on dealing with religious issues. I doubt that we have a written policy on the inclusion or exclusion of

religious holidays. [Do we need a local policy on dealing with religious issues?] Yes, as I said earlier, I feel strongly that they do need a local policy and that's to protect everyone. I think in that policy people should be made aware of other customs and holidays and those should be taught in the classroom rather than just the one [Christmas]. I have strong feelings about this issue and that's because I'm not from this area. I do know that you almost lost your life for asking teachers to be aware of others and to use the more generic term "Happy Holidays" rather than "Merry Christmas." It might help some to be in a minority group at some point in their life to understand how it affects them.

FHT2: That's a hard question because a lot of times when you tell people they can't do something it ends up becoming a major problem. But I think that guidelines would be good to have to help on how far can I go talking about this [religious issues]. Although it has never caused a problem in the past, it might be good to know if anything ever did come up. Dealing with issues such as dealing with Jehovah's Witnesses—what am I supposed to do? Or even what can I do? I'd just like to be more informed on what that religion thinks—so I'm more informed.

FHT3: Well, I think that it would be helpful to have a policy especially if you have a system of a lot of young teachers that maybe aren't really aware [of diversity issues]. I guess I've taught long enough to be able to sift through and know what you can do or if you're treading on thin ice. I think a policy would be helpful especially to new teachers. The policy should state—I think that it certainly should include if you are going to talk about this or do anything with it you need to include different religious holidays. Not just Christmas, but Hanukkah and other holidays for other religions.

FHT4: Yes, I know we don't have a policy—I guess I would just have assumed that we would have a written policy, and we really probably need one so that we'll know what to do. I think when I saw that book that Buzz Thomas had worked on I thought that was our policy. I remember looking through that [*Finding Common Ground*] with you at one point and I guess I thought that was a policy. I really had not thought about it [church and state issues] until I started going through this and when you stop and think about what we don't know. If you had a policy you would have something to show a parent if anything is questioned. So it's something we probably need to look at.

FHT5: Gosh—I don't know—maybe it would be. I kind of like to feel that I don't have to have a policy on it myself. I like to feel that I have enough judgment and sensitivity to other people to not have to have a policy on it, but there may be some people who have very strong beliefs and are teachers and maybe would need a policy for balance. I think I have pretty strong beliefs, but I can still see how that could be a problem for somebody that has strong beliefs in another direction. I don't think it would be helpful to me. It's hard not to do the true

meaning of Christmas because you are taking that time—getting off from school and yet you're afraid of being be jumped on. Maybe [a policy would help], but I don't know.

The fact that some FH teachers were confused on whether or not a local policy existed does raise a major issue for the FH leaders. Teachers must be provided with good information on how to deal with controversies like Christmas in public schools whether a local school board policy exists or not.

Four of the five FH interviewed teachers did not remember any incident where they had been approached to display or hand out religious materials:

FHT1: No, really I haven't. What was it we were giving one time? Bookmarks or something that was being given out by one group that came around, but I think that was just for the teachers. Not for the kids, but more personal for the teachers. [Do your student ever talk about their churches?] Mostly just about programs.

FHT2: In my own classroom I have not. I don't know if the school has, but I have not gotten anything like that. The kids will come in and talk about [church]—in my class we have a question of the day. Some days we'll do five tribles [fuzzy little worm creatures from the Foothills' Character Education Program—Tribes] This is where they [students] answer—"How do you feel today?" They [the tribles] have a color that they [the students] will connect with. They can give a reason why they feel happy, excited or sad. Sometimes they will say "I'm happy because I get to go to church this weekend or I get to do this or that" So among themselves the kids will talk about church.

FHT3: No I have not been approached by religious groups to pass out religious literature. Now when I was at another school a teacher there was approached by a group to display the Ten Commandments. She did and about three weeks later someone from the Central Office sent out a memo that this could not be done. But I have never had that experience. No one has ever questioned me or asked me. [Not even to advertise Bible School or anything like that?] I just now thought of this—back in the mid-70's when I was teaching in another school system—I can remember before school was out they would come from a nearby Baptist church and distribute flyers. One year they even put on a little skit about Bible School. Now that was mid-70's...for several years I can remember them coming—right at the end of school and they would do that which included distributing their flyers. I

had forgotten all about that until you said Bible School. That type of thing is not going on any more in the school I used to work for.

FHT4: No, I never have—not in the classroom or actually no one has asked me to hang up anything [religious] in the hallway. Not in the classroom, but we have put something like that in the Teacher's Lounge at times because I know one year I put something up [in the Teacher's Lounge] for our Living Christmas Tree. Children would have seen it only if they just happened to go through [the Teacher's Lounge]. But, no, I haven't been asked. I do remember as a student getting a Bible from the Gideons, but I haven't had anyone approach me about anything like that.

FHT5: Once upon a time we had the Gideons who came in the 5th grade in particular to distribute Bibles. Many of them were from my church. But other than that—no. And that [Gideon's Bible distribution to 5th graders] stopped. And it should have stopped.

Although blatant proselytizing obviously does not happen very often, the leaders must make sure that their staff is knowledgeable on how to handle parents who request that a classroom teacher pass out any materials to children, religious or otherwise.

Only one of the five FH interviewees recalled that a parent or parents had asked about personal religious beliefs:

FHT1: Parents have not asked about my religious beliefs that I am aware of. No, I think they kind of get around that by saying "Where do you go to church?" I have been asked "Where do you go to church?" [Is that to make sure you go to church?] That's right, and that's probably it. No, I don't think it is.

FHT2: This past year I did have a parent at Open House ask me where I went to church. I told where I went, and she didn't seem to have a problem with it. I guess she was trying to get an idea of what her child was going to be exposed to. She never asked again and never caused a problem for me. She was probably just making sure I went to a church, and I would probably do the same thing.

FHT3: No—I might have had a parent or two who have asked where I go to church. But as far as any religious beliefs—no. I have never had anyone to ask me about my religious beliefs. I have had them say "Where do you attend church?" or "Do you go to church?" and this type of thing, but not as far as my actual beliefs go. [Do you think that might have been a leading question to see if you attend church?] Yes—with one or two people—I know it was. Others that have asked were searching for another church to attend or they were new to the community.

But I have had a couple that I know asked me that question to make sure that I went to church somewhere. They would have been the kind that would have probably asked about my religious beliefs, but they didn't. Now...there is a little girl in Mrs. H's class that goes to church where I go. She will say to me, "Did you see me in choir?" or "Did you see me Sunday?" or sometimes she will say, "I saw you at church Sunday." I guess all of this has changed since the mid-70's because I remember the day and time on Monday mornings when I would say "How many of you went to Sunday School yesterday and can you tell me something you learned or what did you talk about? I don't do that anymore. I just don't feel comfortable about it because of everything that has happened in this day and time. Children can go home and say something to mom and dad—they will have it all blown out of proportion and end up on your doorstep [the principal] before 3:00 o'clock that afternoon. I guess that's one thing—back to the policy thing—simple guidelines for new teachers to follow because they would not be as aware of that.

FHT4: Yes, I have—it was a minister in our area a few years ago. He didn't just bluntly asked me what my beliefs were. He said, "I hear you are of the faith." That was the way he approached it and I told him that I was. In fact that's the only person in all the years that I have been education that wanted to pray (and he did) before we started our conference and he prayed afterwards and that was fine. He's the only person who has ever asked—he and his wife were there. Just a few years ago, but that's the only time. [Do you feel limited in any way with your religious beliefs as a public school teacher?] No, I really don't. Mainly because we read books around Christmas and around Easter. The books are usually ones the children have brought in. I think that is an okay thing to do when they bring those books and share them. It's funny. I've never really had questions from the children—maybe it's because they are so little—about religious aspects in a book. I can't remember anybody ever questioning anything. I will have parents who will ask me where I go to church. That will be asked if we're on a field trip and are all sitting and talking or something like that. I don't have anyone come in through the door [classroom] and say, "Where do you go to church or what religion are you?". I did have a little guy [a student] who came in and said he had "prayed and prayed about his teacher and he was glad he had got me because I was Baptist." He couldn't have the other teachers because they were Methodists. That is the only time I had a child say anything. It was funny. I thought he might grow up to be a minister, but he didn't.

FHT5: This is one interesting story. This took place some time ago with someone you would know back in the 5th grade at Fort Craig. I had given homework on a Wednesday night on something. These parents came in and said, "Surely she's a Christian, surely she goes to church, surely she knows on Wednesday night our children go to church and don't have time to do homework." That is the only one I can ever remember and it made me feel like a heel. I said, "Oh, yeah, I am—I

didn't think about that.". I didn't think it was that much to keep them away from church. I hadn't had anybody else except those who say, "What church do you go to?" just to see if you know somebody who they know. Other than that—no.

Since teachers do not seem to be concerned about parental interest in their religious beliefs, the impact on the school leader is usually minimal. However, if a teacher is not aware of the state and church separation issues, handling any religious questions from parents can cause problems. The impact on the FH leaders is to make sure the staff is knowledgeable and sensitive in order to answer these type of inquiries.

Parents. The 5 FH parents (FHPa1-FHPa5) interviewed did not see a major dilemma with their school and Christmas:

FHPa1: I don't think so. If there was, it would probably be that not all beliefs are recognized like the Christian belief of Christmas.

FHPa2: Not that I am aware of at the present time. Everything seems to be very balanced when it comes to religious holidays.

FHPa3: I personally do not feel there is any dilemma at our school concerning the celebration of Christmas. I've only experienced teachers who are very caring and sensitive to all their students.

FHPa4: I am the parent of a second grader student, and I am not aware of any dilemma surrounding Christmas. I can also speak as a substitute teacher. I worked in the school about six days from Thanksgiving until Christmas, and I did not see any problems associated with Christmas inclusion. The students seemed very excited about the season.

FHPa5: Children seem to be accepting without being critical. The problem of Christmas resides with the parents and the parents' values being threatened. The school staff does not and should not get involved in the state and church struggle. I know of some schools where that ended up being pretty difficult for everyone.

The FH leaders should feel some positive support from the interviewed parents as to how the school is viewed regarding its handling of religious holidays like Christmas. Almost

all of the FH parents interviewed seemed to feel that their children's teachers provided appropriate inclusion of Christmas in their classrooms:

FHPa1: Yes, but it seems to be only a superficial, commercialized kind of way. I think everyone is afraid of creating some legal problem over a religious issue.

FHPa2: Yes, my child's teacher includes Christmas in her classroom. It may be more commercial than religious, but I suppose that is all they are allowed to do.

FHPa3: Yes, it is not presented in a religious way; it is on a more secular level—for example, Christmas trees, snowmen, etc. I think that is probably the proper approach.

FHPa4: Yes, the classroom had a Christmas tree. I really liked how the students had a Christmas unit on the various Christmas customs from around the world. My son learned a lot, and he really enjoyed the unit.

FHPa5: We have holiday celebrations. I don't believe I have heard the word Christmas. I guess that's the politically correct way to present Christmas in a public school.

The wide scattering of beliefs of how parents view FH and Christmas could result in some problems for the school's leadership as it did in December of 1999.

The five FH parents in general seemed to feel other parents at this school were satisfied with the way Christmas is handled:

FHPa1: I am not aware of any, but someone told me last year that teachers are not allowed to mention Christ. I'm not sure that person really knew what they were talking about. My child's teacher said that was not true.

FHPa2: No, not currently. However, a school the size of Foothills I'm sure has some parents that are not happy with everything that is presented with Christmas or any holiday.

FHPa3: I've been aware of one situation, but it was handled very professionally and in a sensitive manner. I think parents are pretty happy in the way the staff here approaches religious holidays.

FHPa4: I am not aware of any parental concerns at school.

FHPa5: Most of the parents I have talked with would like to include Christmas in the classroom—perhaps with a little more religious information than is currently presented or displayed.

The overall impact on the FH leaders would have to be seen as positive since parental concerns by the 5 interviewees seem to be minimal as they looked critically at the different issues raised by Christmas. Nevertheless, there is a definite desire on the part of some for a more Christian influence in the classroom.

Despite some indications of a Christian bias, FH parents emphasized that all religions should be studied as factually as possible with only the omission of teacher's personal feelings or beliefs:

FHPa1: Yes, a general education about various religions would be appropriate, especially if those religions are represented by the student population.

FHP2: Yes, but only on a limited basis. If included in school, only the highlights should be stressed: what holidays celebrated, knowledge that there are others who do not share our beliefs, etc.

FHP3: I feel it would be acceptable in an educational format. Tolerance of all people should be the goal.

FHP4: Yes, I think it is okay to include religious information as long as it is taught as facts only instead of personal feelings or beliefs.

FHP5: Yes, we should all be informed of cultural differences which include religion so that a deeper appreciation and understanding of cultural differences can occur and hopefully eliminate cultural prejudices.

The interviewed FH parents seem to be fairly united on the need for studying different religions that they felt would eliminate many misunderstandings among different religious groups. An impact on the FH leaders might be the need to make a better effort to educate the staff on the need to provide information on diverse religions. Some of the

parents seem to be ready to support the civic approach that is advocated by the 1st Amendment Center which suggests helping different cultures to accept each other.

In response to the question on whether the FH teachers and staff could go either too far or fall short in their approach to dealing with Christmas resulted in a variety of responses:

FHPa1: Yes, if the school ever ignored Christmas because of diversity. I think the responsibility is to recognize and respect all religions and not force those who do not believe in Christ to participate.

FHPa2: Yes, I believe a school staff can go either too far in recognizing or too far in ignoring Christmas.

FHPa3: I feel the way it is taken too far is if the teacher has his/her own agenda and is trying to push their personal beliefs onto his/her students. That has never happened at FH.

FHPa4: No, I do not feel the school can go too far in recognizing the Christmas season. It is a traditional holiday that has been celebrated for a long time. I am very supportive of Christmas decorations, music pageants, concerts, artwork and parties at school.

FHPa5: Yes, all behaviors need to be recognized on some level and in believing that I feel that ignoring or over promoting a subject can be detrimental to the learning process. Simple factual statements [about Christmas]...will promote interest. It will not convert anyone.

Despite one parent's interest in more emphasis on Christmas, the interviewed FH parents offered a generally balanced discussion of how to approach the Christmas issues in a public school. In contrast, the FH parents looked at the display of religious materials on bulletin boards in a mostly conservative way, for they saw little problem with overt Christmas messages:

FHPa1: Bulletin boards may be used for displaying "Merry Christmas" as long as other religions are represented.

FHPa2: I find the display of “Merry Christmas” acceptable because I believe in and study the Bible. I think it would be okay to be presented in a “nativity” setting because it is not contrary to what I believe in.

FHPa3: If the bulletin board is presented in an educational format, I believe religious topics would be acceptable. I know there are guidelines each school must follow and sensitivity to all students should be the rule. Our society and culture has adapted the statement “Merry Christmas” for all areas. You see it in malls, stores, on shirts—just about everywhere. If it is presented with trees, gifts, snowmen, rather than a manger and Jesus, I can’t see any potential problem. But I personally believe the message of Christmas is love and if I am doing something that offends another, then I would change my behavior.

FHPa4: Yes, if they are related to the holiday being observed during the calendar year: for example, Easter and Christmas. Yes, I feel that a “Merry Christmas” display is acceptable. It can be presented with Santa, Christmas trees, snow, stockings, glitter, gifts, and lights. Some of these secular items have religious symbolism and history that will be recognized by Christians and ignored by other people.

FHPa5: I see no harm in several bulletin boards used to display religious topics. To be politically correct and educational, several bulletin boards depicting the different ways that Christmas is celebrated would be neat. I know so little of other religious beliefs about Christmas that it would be great to see how each group celebrates and in what ways.

The potential for misunderstandings about Christmas and other religious issues presented on bulletin boards should be carefully reviewed by the FH staff when one considers the generally conservative parental viewpoints

Two FH parents had additional comments to make on Christmas and the public elementary school:

FHPa1: I’ve always believed that people’s objections to religion in school were because it always goes toward the majority with the minority religions ignored. Our school doesn’t have a particularly diverse population, but I’m sure there are other religions besides Christianity. Those should be recognized during the holiday season as well as Christmas. I’d like for the school to be able to mention Jesus at Christmas while at the same time reminding the students that some religions do not believe that Jesus is the Savior.

FHPa2: I know offense has been taken on the issue sometimes in the past several years. A Junior Service League “Toys for Tots” poster hanging in the school became the topic of disagreement because the poster referenced “Christmas.” The poster has been changed to be politically correct and so as not to offend anyone or their religion. In my opinion, Christmas cannot be celebrated without recognition given to the birth of Jesus—as the t-shirt says, “Jesus Is the Reason for the Season.”

The thoughts of these two parents should alert the FH leadership to the importance of providing a thoughtful approach to dealing with Christmas and other religious holidays. If the school operates within the extremes that these two parents prefer, a potential imbalance will occur creating potential critical issues for the non-Christian groups.

Former Maryville Board of Education Chairman. Oliver “Buzz” Thomas on January 16, 2002, was interviewed to provide his perspective on the events that surrounded the Christmas dilemma at Foothills Elementary School in 1999. Mr. Thomas related:

Perhaps the Christmas dilemma at Foothills could have been avoided if the Maryville School Board had had a local policy in place to deal with religious issues. The whole Christmas party debate should have never been raised. Although the school board did not adopt a comprehensive policy on religion as we should have, we did agree to follow and distribute the legal guidelines in *Finding Common Ground*. We distributed a lot of the parent guides jointly published by the First Amendment Center and the PTA. During the time I was on the Board I chaired the community Character Education Committee that included getting input from educators, students and community leaders on civic values. This committee was able to make a proposal on Character Education to the Board which was passed unanimously. We were able to address many sensitivity issues which included some religious issues that affect not only a diverse student population, but everyone.

Mr. Thomas also added that he believed:

The letter writing attacks by a group calling themselves the Concerned Christian Citizens did not cause any real setbacks for Foothills or the City of Maryville schools. In truth we had some positive growth, for if we had any real setbacks, they were only temporary. Our leadership’s knowledge base is now at least a little

more aware of the explosive nature that can be generated from some groups over religious holidays like Christmas.

Mr. Thomas further believes:

Christmas activities in public elementary schools can be handled appropriately by administrators and teachers. These activities can have very positive impacts on our nation's public schools. National reactions due in part to the terrorists' attacks on September 11th....If religious issues are mishandled by educators, the results will probably result in very negative outcomes.

Thomas also says:

The work of individuals such as 1st Amendment Center's Dr. Charles Haynes has provided both national and regional successes in helping educators to better understand what freedom of religion really means. The Center's work has definitely provided a resource for school and community leaders who are more tuned into their civic responsibilities. This work has been going on for the past ten years. Training projects for educators in Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Utah, and California have reaped positive results.

Mr. Thomas talked about what he called the two extremes—*naked* schools and *sacred* schools:

The so-called naked public school is a place where religion is simply ignored or eliminated altogether. The sacred public school seeks to impose religion on students. The "civil" or "civic" public school that Dr. Haynes and I advocate is one where religion is treated appropriately in the curriculum and religious liberty rights of students or all or no faith are respected. This approach avoids supporting a particular religion, while offering a study about all religions.

Finally, Mr. Thomas advised:

Elementary school leaders should request and support their school boards to enact a policy on religion that will serve as a guide for appropriate inclusion of religion in the curriculum. This policy would provide a sound method on how holidays should be handled in elementary school activities. Administrators and teachers would be trained and become more skilled in state and church issues. I believe it is only logical that a trained staff would be able to handle state and church issues appropriately. Books such as *Finding Common Grounds* can be used as guidelines for developing a balanced approach to incorporating religious issues into the curriculum.

If school leaders are willing to incorporate a program such as one the 1st Amendment Center is advocating, a more successful approach to the religious holiday issue might be developed in advance of a full-blown problem.

Thomas summarized:

A balanced approach to dealing with religion seems to offer a less explosive situation for elementary school leaders. A well-written local school board policy on religion will serve to establish a more balanced approach in handling controversial classroom issues that may come up during holidays.

East Tennessee School: Case Description #2

The Kindergarten-5th Grade East Tennessee School (ET) is found in a rural area some 15 miles from the nearest city. The school population is made up of 606 students who are transported by bus from an area of about 25 square miles. The staff is made up of 40 professional staff members and 26 paraprofessionals. The school has made numerous changes in organizational patterns in the past years. Initially, the program was a K-12, but after the system consolidated into two large comprehensive high schools, ET became a K-8 and then recently shifted to its present organization. The demographic racial breakdown for the ET school and system is 96.9% White, 1.5% Black, .7% Hispanic, .6% Asian, and .3% Other. The free/reduced lunch percent is 34.36%. The per capita student expenditure is \$5,646, which is below the state average of \$6,066.

Upon entering the foyer to the ET elementary school during December, the observer cannot help but notice the large decorated Christmas tree that signaled the spirit of the school's emphasis on the upcoming holiday. The decorations throughout the hallways and classrooms included every aspect of both a secular and a religious Christmas. A large banner of the nativity was hanging over the door of one of the

classrooms. Perhaps if one could pick a theme from the overall school's decorations, it would be angels, for large numbers of them were hanging from the ceiling and on the bulletin boards throughout the building. Most of these angels were made by the students. Both "Happy Holidays" and "Merry Christmas" were also displayed throughout the building. One bulletin board featured children's artwork that highlighted the three Wise Men. Tying in the secular Santa Claus, a large number of fireplaces were displayed throughout the hallways and classrooms, each with colorful stockings filled with toys. Another artwork display included cathedral-type stained glass windows with lighted candles. Although music was not being played in the hallways, one could hear Christmas carols and secular songs being sung in some of the classrooms. The ET school clearly focused on special events about to happen in both religious and secular ways.

The abundance of Christmas decorations throughout the building suggested questions about whether or not this school was studying a religious holiday as opposed to celebrating a religious holiday. An observer had to wonder whether or not the apparent celebratory focus created any problems for the principal and the school staff in their efforts to comply with the school board policy or interpret the federal courts' rulings on the separation of church and state.

Administrators. The ET principal (ETP) and assistant principal (ETAP) believed they closely followed school board policy (see Appendix H) on dealing with Christmas in their public school:

ETP: Our school system deals with religious holidays by following the school board policy that covers how we should be dealing with religious beliefs, customs and holidays. The policy also helps us deal with controversial issues.

ETAP: Religious holidays aren't recognized as such, but allows excused absences as needed.

The policy they were referring to stresses that the school children are to learn about holidays such as Christmas, but does not advocate the celebration of these event at school.

The administrators at ET stressed that their school system provided adequate in-service training for their teachers to help them deal with religious issues:

ETP: Our in-service training is on cultural diversity, but does deal with some religious issues. I feel this is adequate since we have no problems. I believe we will be okay as long as we just follow state laws and board policies. I'm really not aware of any problems and know of none in our school system.

ETAP: There is cultural diversity training provided for all county employees. I feel this training process is very effective.

The ET administrators both felt action would have to be taken to discipline any employee who willfully attempted to proselytize a particular religion:

ETP: My thoughts concerning a staff member promoting a particular religion would be again to follow federal law, state law and school board policy. I would follow board policy regarding dismissal of certified employees.

ETAP: I think the policy is very specific on dealing with those who promote a particular religion even with what action should be taken if the policy is not followed.

Despite the decorations that emphasized traditional Christian themes, the principals did not interpret any of the Christmas actions by the teachers and staff at ET as creating any state and church problems. Both the principal and his assistant principal felt Christmas is addressed in a non-religious way:

ETP: Christmas programs are non-religious, and no religious displays are used in the school. I feel we have had no major complications over the years.

ETAP: Christmas plays and programs are non-religious, and displays are also non-religious.

Furthermore, both ET principals did not see any reason to promote greater sensitivity by their staffs towards those who are non-Christian:

ETP: Since it [sensitivity to diversity] is not a problem at this time, I see no need to make any changes. We will just continue to follow laws and policy.

ETAP: Sensitivity to diverse students is not a problem at this time. We follow board policies very thoroughly.

Basically, they felt if there is not a problem at this time, why should they bring up what could become a potentially negative issue? Hence, if they did not address sensitivity to religions that were not followed by the majority population at ET, they really did not have a problem to address. One might question whether or not any non-Christian students at ET have some hidden negative feelings about themselves with Christmas being so overtly recognized. The principals who feel no reason exists to promote greater sensitivity toward non-Christian students may, in fact, have a small percentage of their population who feel excluded.

Finally, neither of the ET principals saw that their religious backgrounds hindered them in any way as they carried out their responsibilities as leaders at ET:

ETP: I am sure my religious background is reflected in my day-to-day operation of the school. I can't say it has hindered me in any way. I just follow board policy and laws as directed by the courts.

ETAP: My religious background is evident by my actions. I am not hindered in any way.

This compliance with board policies was a recurring emphasis that they believe has been successful in their dealings with all aspects of different religions. Therefore, they feel any problems that might develop due to a religious holiday should be minimal.

Teachers. None of the five interviewed ET teachers (ETT1-ETT5) felt Christmas created any problems for their teaching assignment:

ETT1: I think it's a great time of the year; it doesn't really cause any problems for me.

ETT2: Not usually; however, we are always aware of students in our class who do not celebrate Christmas—the Jehovah's Witnesses group would fall into this category. I believe that problems will not occur as long as we're sensitive to the fact that some families do not celebrate Christmas.

ETT3: No, ET is a unique place. We're isolated from a lot of criticism that occurs in other areas.

ETT4: No problem which I guess is shocking since I've been teaching for a very long time.

ETT5: Christmas does not create any problems for my teaching assignment.

Although they felt non-Christian groups are dealt with carefully by acknowledging and honoring the fact that they do not celebrate Christmas, most of the interviewed ET teachers think that outside influences that might occur in more urban areas tend not to reach ET. However, one might question how the non-Christian students feel about the massive amount of religious decorations that are displayed throughout the school. This also leads the researcher to question whether or not isolation from the outside world's influences justifies or even excuses a public school's staff blurring the concept of separation of church and state. The legal impact on the school leadership can only raise

the question of how long their isolation from outside influences will prevent problems from occurring at ET.

The ET teachers expressed different perspectives in response to the question about whether they felt the majority religion in their area (Christianity) received extra attention at their school:

ETT1: We make sure nothing is pushed on any child. I feel Christianity might get some extra attention, but I'm careful to not step across the church and state line.

ETT2: It's only natural that students who attend Protestant churches are involved in conversations about church activities with their peers when at school.

ETT3: I think we should be able to have Christmas activities instead of "winter" activities.

ETT4: Most of my students attend church on a regular basis. Those that don't usually are at least aware of the meaning of Christmas so we are comfortable with the many ways Christmas is celebrated.

ETT5: I feel most of the students in our school are of the Protestant faith. Many students are in programs at their church. We also provide secular activities at school.

In examining the viewpoints of the interviewed teachers at ET, one might observe the Christian faith does seem to be getting a great deal of attention as opposed to any other religious group.

As mentioned by their leaders, the ET teachers also discussed how a school board policy had been passed to help them deal with the study of religions and holidays within their curriculum. ET teachers who were interviewed had definite opinions about the inclusion of the study of diverse religions in the curriculum:

ETT1: We study only a short time about December holidays of other cultures—holidays are important to them [students]. Christmas is just one of these

holidays. I recognize that there are different religions, but do not teach any specific doctrine.

ETT2: I recognize that there are different religions, but do not teach any specific doctrine.

ETT3: I don't like it, but I do it.

ETT4: I feel students should be aware that everybody doesn't attend the same kind of church, but we worship the same God.

ETT5: When I have students of other faiths, I have no problems with sharing with the entire class the others' beliefs. I make sure each student's beliefs are respected.

The ET teachers who provided their thoughts had a variety of ways at looking at the legality of limiting the inclusion of Christmas in their classrooms:

ETT1: I do not advertise or push my beliefs on the children; therefore, I see no problems. First graders naturally discuss things that happen in their lives and Christmas is one of those things.

ETT2: I place the importance on cultural diversity; I like recognizing and accepting differences in beliefs and customs.

ETT3: Once again, I do as I am told, but don't like it!

ETT4: I teach in a rural area and this has not been a problem for me. If I were in a more diverse area, I could understand these limitations.

ETT5: I carefully follow the guidelines set by the Board of Education.

Considering the large number of Christmas decorations (many of a religious nature) at ET with some of the teachers wanting even more, one would expect that some community members might question the lack of separation of church and state issues. In actuality, however, none of ET teachers were aware of any criticism directed toward the way they handled Christmas in their classroom. They could not remember in all their

years of teaching any incidents when parents questioned the inclusion or lack of inclusion of any aspect of Christmas and their classrooms:

ETT1: No, I have been very careful; for example, with Jehovah's Witnesses children. I plan special art activities for these children. The activities do not include any holidays in honoring their parents' wishes.

ETT2: Not that were directed at me.

ETT3: No, I believe my students and parents are very satisfied.

ETT4: No, I guess I'm pretty proud of that.

ETT5: I have not been aware of any criticism about the way I approach Christmas.

As previously discussed, the ET teachers believe they properly follow the board limitations on dealing with Christmas. They feel that they are studying about Christmas and not promoting a celebration of Christmas:

ETT1: Only if I have a Jehovah's Witness student. I have to make special plans...I attempt to work together with the parents of these students to plan alternative activities.

ETT2; No, I have never been questioned about the way I include or exclude Christmas in my classroom. My parents seemed to be pretty happy with my approach.

ETT3: No, I wish I could do more, but I must be doing okay since no one seems to be complaining.

ETT4: I guess I include enough since my parents are not complaining. At least I not been made aware of any complaints.

ETT5: I have never been questioned by parents on the way I approach Christmas in my classroom.

It seemed that ET teachers did not really want to talk at any great length about the effectiveness of their school board's policy on dealing with religion. They felt in general that their system's policy was adequate:

ETT1: We follow the policy that our board has passed. If you need information on this policy check with the Central Office. I'm sure you can secure a copy.

ETT2: Our policy recognizes different religions, but does not show any preferences.

ETT3: When legal issues get involved, that's when trouble begins!

ETT4: I really don't have an opinion about our board policy. I guess it's effective enough.

ETT5: I feel as a teacher I need to follow the Board of Education policy. In my school system I have not been aware of a problem with religion in the schools.

The observer's data on Christian motifs in the decorative appearance of the school building and classrooms might indicate some discrepancy in the extent to which the interviewed ET teachers are actually following the school board policy. However, since the leadership had not received any criticisms on the way Christmas was being observed at ET, at least at this time no negative impact was apparent.

In response to the questions of whether or not the interviewed ET teachers had been approached by anyone to pass out religious literature to their students, only one of the five recalled being approached. She mentioned an annual tradition of Bibles being distributed and said, "Many years ago when I taught 5th grade, the Gideons gave New Testaments to the students. The students were not required to take one. It was offered on a volunteer basis." This account resonates with my own past experiences as a 5th grade teacher and later as an elementary school principal. ET principals had obviously

eliminated the practice of Gideons bringing Bibles to ET 5th graders. The fact that the Gideons are no longer allowed to come on campus and distribute Bibles suggests that this particular state and church issue has had at least some impact on the leadership of the school and school system. The other four ET teachers who had never taught the 5th grade did not remember any situation when they had been asked to give out religious materials. However, one reflected, “ I don’t remember ever being approached, but I would decline and refer them to the principal.”

ET had only one of the interviewed teachers who remembered any incident when a parent had asked about her religious beliefs:

ETT1: Yes, I have been asked about my religious beliefs by a parent. I feel I can answer without crossing the state and church line. That is, if I don’t try to convert that person to my way of thinking.

ETT2: No, I’ve never been approached unless you count being asked about where I attend church.

ETT3: No, I haven’t been asked about my religious beliefs.

ETT4: No, I hope my daily example tells them how I believe.

ETT5: I have never had parents to ask me about my religious beliefs.

Generally, the leadership as well as some of the interviewed teachers voiced that modeling their beliefs was as far as they would go in promoting their religious beliefs.

Parents. ET parents (ETPa1-ETPa5) who were interviewed did not feel Christmas activities caused any real problems for their school:

ETPa1: The only problem may be the misunderstandings of other (non-Christian) children’s beliefs.

ETPa2: No, I don’t think we have any kind of dilemma.

ETPa3: No, I think Christmas has its proper place at ET.

ETPa4: Christmas does not create any dilemma for my family.

ETPa5: I don't see any real problems with Christmas at our school.

They all tended to feel it was a time of the year that all the children seem to enjoy.

All but one of the interviewed ET parents felt their children's teachers were providing the appropriate inclusion of Christmas with art activities, stories and color pages:

ETPa1: My child's teacher does a nice job of including the Christmas theme without including details regarding Christian-related issues.

ETPa2: Yes, everything in my child's classroom seems to be working out appropriately.

ETPa3: No, I think more could be included about the true Christmas meaning.

ETPa4: Yes, my child's classroom activities seem to hit the right balance on Christmas inclusion.

ETPa5: I know of no parental concerns at my child's school.

These statements of support for the teachers seem to be a major confirmation for the ET leaders of the appropriateness of what their staff seems to be doing with this religious holiday.

Interviewed ET parental concerns seem to be fairly minimal:

ETPa1: As a parent I would like a more diverse and detailed explanation regarding the origin of Christmas.

ETPa2: I'm not aware of any concerns in my family or any others.

ETPa3: No, I believe everyone that I know seems supportive of Christmas activities at ET.

ETPa4: I'm not aware of any.

ETPa5: No, I'm not aware of any parent concerns.

The inclusion in the school curriculum of information about diverse religious beliefs seemed to be generally acceptable to ET parents with the only differences occurring over the depth of these studies:

ETPa1: Yes, I would like to expose my children to a wide diversity of beliefs in an attempt to develop a respect for other religious beliefs.

ETPa2: Yes, but general information only, so a child can understand that other beliefs, religions, exist.

ETPa3: Yes, the school curriculum should include information about all religions.

ETPa4: I have no problem with that as long as all beliefs are discussed.

ETPa5: Yes, I believe that information that concerns diverse beliefs can benefit my child's knowledge of society and different opinions.

The interviewed parents were all very clear on making sure Christmas was included at ET. What constituted too much Christmas or too little Christmas varied:

ETPa1: Yes, our Headstart program does not mention the Christmas season or any other religious holiday. Their attempt to not offend anyone clouds the importance of the holiday. Headstart is a government (federal) funded program. At meals the children fold their hands and say a poem before eating. Kind of reminds me of a prayer which I have no problem with. Once again, as a parent, I believe that our country was founded on religious beliefs. The complete exclusion of religion without respect for or exposure to religion is highly objectionable. My children should not be subjected to atheistic views only as not to offend.

ETPa2: Yes, one religion should not be picked out and pushed on the children.

ETPa3: I suppose a teacher could go too far, but I am very pleased with how our school district recognizes Christmas and Hanukkah.

ETPa4: I don't think they can go too far in recognizing the events of Christmas.

ETPa5: Yes, a staff needs to be careful to balance Christmas and not to overdo it.

Given the range of ideas here, the school's leadership could potentially have some problems with an undercurrent of dissension by parents unless a definition of what constitutes too much or too little at Christmas is clarified.

ET parents generally felt that the teachers of their children could be trusted to use bulletin boards appropriately to display religious topics, including "Merry Christmas."

These parents expressed their thoughts:

ETPa1: Yes, we display other signs that may or may not pertain to everyone. For example, "Don't Do Drugs," and no one takes offense at this even if we never consider doing them in the first place. However, it would be nice to make bulletin boards with respect to other religious beliefs—the Christian version "Merry Christmas" or the atheistic "Happy Holidays." We are all going to be out of school—so it is a holiday—are we offending anyone? Or maybe "Happy Hanukkah." I don't find a problem with this. Do it with respect to other beliefs. My children understand that Santa Claus is a belief that is subject to religious belief and personal preference.

ETP2: Yes, Yes, bulletin boards that are showing a time when all families come together—no matter what differences they have—if any.

ETP3: I do not have a problem with the school bulletin boards displaying religious statements—"Merry Christmas" is acceptable.

ETP4: Bulletin boards are used for a variety of things and I believe that Christmas/religious topics should be included—displays are fine—anyway the teacher decides.

ETP5: Yes, Christmas has many meanings—religious and conventional. A teacher should always run things by their superiors if they feel that their ideas are different than those that are in charge of our school.

Parents at ET do not seem to have any problem with the amount of decorations they see at their child's school. This positive, supportive attitude provides the ET leadership with more confirmation on the appropriateness of their Christmas leadership methods. The implication for the ET leadership might be to recognize that some of their

community members want a public school that operates more like a private Christian school. If this concept is very prevalent in the ET community, the efforts by the school leadership to keep their staffs basically neutral and balanced on religious issues could be in jeopardy.

Midwestern Elementary Schools: Case Descriptions #3A and #3B

A Midwestern School System, located on the edge of a large Midwestern city, has several organizational structures to accommodate individual schools. Similar to the researcher's home school system of Maryville, Tennessee, the school system includes four elementary schools, a middle school and high school. One of the main slogans of the MW school system is that "children are 29% of our community, but 100% of our future." To back up this belief, the system has invested an average of \$7,835 per pupil, an amount almost \$100 higher than the state's average. In contrast, this economic support is over \$500 more per pupil than the Tennessee schools (although the cost of living in each area may have an impact on these totals). According to the MW school system's statistical breakdown, the median household income for the area is \$34,655. The free/reduced lunch percentage is 24.4% (as compared to Maryville's 20.1% and ET's 34.36%).

These schools are housed in a diverse community. The racial makeup of the school system is 80.5% Caucasian, 10.3% Black, 3.2% Hispanic, 2.6% Asian and 6.4% Other. The area's dominant religion is Protestant (Lutheran). This is in contrast to the two Tennessee schools in the study where the majority religion is also Protestant, but mostly in some form of the Baptist Church. The Midwestern area has large numbers of children from Catholic, Jewish, Mennonite, and Jehovah's Witnesses homes. Islam is also

growing in the area with large numbers in the nearby Midwestern city. Again this is in contrast to the Tennessee population in the area of study which is predominately Caucasian with small percentages of Blacks, Hispanics and Asians. The total of the racial minorities in the Tennessee area of study are only 10% or less.

The Midwestern educational leaders view their diversity as a strength and work hard to celebrate it within their curriculum and extracurricular activities. Two elementary schools which share the same geographic and population zone (and therefore similar demographics) were interested in having the researcher conduct interviews. This enabled the researcher to get a better picture of the Christmas story as it occurs in this Midwestern school district.

The policies dealing with holidays in the two geographic areas have similarities and differences. Neither Maryville City Schools nor the Midwestern School District have written local policies that specifically deal with religious holidays. The East Tennessee school is, however, from a school system that does have a written policy on state and church issues. The policy of the Midwestern school system that generally relates to the Christmas issue is a section that allows only the last hour of the school day to be used for any type of party. This gives parents an option to either take their children out of school during one of these parties or request that their children be provided another activity during such an event.

The first of the two MW elementary schools (MWSC) researched is located in a northern Midwestern state near a large city. The school is organized in a K-5th grade arrangement. The student population is 350 students with a racial breakdown very similar

to the system's averages (as reported earlier). The majority of the 25 teaching staff members have at least a Bachelor's degree with 45 additional graduate hours, and over a third of the staff have Master's degrees or higher. The school has only one building level administrator. Art, music and physical education are provided by full-time specialists. Two days a week a technology specialist works at MWSC (this person is shared with MWSD as described below). Paraprofessionals (20) are provided as assistants to the instructional staff.

The Midwest School D (MWSD) is also located in a northern Midwestern state near a large city. The school is organized in a K-5 arrangement. The student population is 415 students with a racial makeup of 75% Caucasian, 21.1% Black, 2% Hispanic, 1% Asian and .9% Other. This school's racial mix is slightly different from the system's averages. The median household income for the area is a little less than the system's average of \$34,655. Free/reduced lunch percentages are also a little higher than the system's 24.4%. The majority of 30 teachers on staff have at least a Bachelor's degree plus graduate hours with the staff also meeting the high level of 33.5% who have Master's degrees or higher. The diversity of the staff includes one Jewish teacher. An average of \$7,835 is spent per pupil. The school has only one building level administrator. Art, music and physical education are provided by full-time specialists. Two days a week a technology specialist works at MWSC (this person is shared with MWSD as described below). Paraprofessionals (20) are provided as assistants to the instructional staff.

As described by the staff and parents, MWSC decorations or displays during the two weeks prior to their Winter Recess were generally found to have a secular Christmas theme. Bulletin boards throughout the school used only “Happy Holidays” motifs. Few Christmas decorations were actually used; instead a winter holiday theme dominated with some snowflakes, Santa Claus and elves. Parent volunteers operated a shop as a store for students (as a fund raiser for school’s family-teacher organization) to purchase items as gifts for their families, but this store was called the fairly generic “Gingerbread Shop.” The classrooms were not excessively decorated in holiday items. The decorations that were displayed were not of the religious variety.

Administrators. The MWSC principal said of her school system:

We don’t have a written policy on religious holidays. We do not formally recognize any of the religious holidays. I know as far as the library we do have books about Christmas which [is acceptable] because they are voluntarily checked out. But as far as dealing with religious holidays we typically tend not to enter into any religious issues. I know even I’m very sensitive to the fact about when we break at the Christmas time—we call it Winter break. I try to be real conscious about Spring break and not Easter break. So I try to be real conscious about that.

In-service training has been minimal for the MWS system. The MWSC principal described what has been done in her area:

Well, what we have done is Dr. B (Director of the MW School District) has been very good about providing us administrators with information about religious aspects of the schools. She actually has provided several brochures. We do have [the brochures] and you know I have offered that to the teachers as well if they have any questions or concerns. But as far as in-servicing—we’re given brochures and the teachers are informed of those, but we haven’t formally done an in-service. [Do you think there is any need for training?] I think any type of training is beneficial. I think to be just on an awareness level—just as far as the diversity piece. Interestingly enough I just read a letter to the editor in the...[local newspaper] yesterday about a teacher that had gone to a public school setting and they had done a concert and she felt there were too many religious overtones with the music. This particular person was a public school teacher in a different system

who felt very uncomfortable and felt like if the children wanted to hear that type of music, it should have been in church. And it said she felt that there was no diversity. That was not our district, but it made me think about if we do enough with diversity here. That was in the...[local paper] just yesterday.

The effectiveness of the MWS system's handling of sensitive religious issues found the MWSC principal saying:

I think we tend to be pretty conservative. I think most people are pretty sensitive to different religious aspects. I think the teachers do a nice job—not to say all of them—I would say most of them are pretty conscious about that. And like I said my librarian was very concerned last year when someone had donated some books and some of them had Christmas overtones. She was very concerned about putting them in the library. I said to her that “you are fine” because they are voluntarily checked out. It's still reference material, and we're not forcing the children to take it out. So I think they are pretty sensitive to that.

The MWSC principal has not had a staff member proselytizing a particular religion, but she did have an opinion on the action she would take if this happened:

I have not had that problem. If I did, I certainly would bring that staff member in and we would go over the information that I have as far as what they are allowed to do—what they are permitted to do and just do some education with them.

Christmas is addressed at MWSC in such a way that the principal feels problems are averted. She explains:

We are still—a little diverse, but not a lot. I have to think back—the music teacher did do a program that was pretty Santa Clausish focused—you know, the reindeer. [Commercial approach?] Exactly, the commercialized Christmas. I didn't get any response, and I don't think there were any children who didn't participate. There were some students that were from diverse backgrounds who still participated. So that didn't seem to be a concern.

Getting her staff to be more sensitive to those who have diverse religions brought this response:

I think most people would be pretty receptive to it. I mean I think we all could have a better understanding of different religions. For the students' benefit just a better education and I think we're becoming a more global society. There is going

to be more diversity. Much as we are still somewhat homogeneous, that is not the way it's always going to be. And I think most people are pretty open to that [promoting greater sensitivity to diverse religions]. I think we're pretty open now—I'm not going to say everybody is going to jump on the bandwagon to do the same thing, but I think most people are pretty sensitive.

The MWSC principal did not feel her religious background was a problem. She responded:

I would say it probably helps. Right now my family—we go to a very contemporary [church] that is housed in a Presbyterian church. But it is housed with the nine o'clock service—we have a band—very contemporary and it's very accepting of everybody. We have many people who have been raised Catholic that come to this church. Some people have identified this as like church-lite. Like I said we have a band—we show movie clips—we try to relate it to what's going on in your life. So there has even been Buddhists—it has been very accepting of everybody. And the message is that God loves everybody. And so for me in the community—I live in the Old West End which you're not familiar with since you don't live around here—that is a very diverse neighborhood with different ethnic groups, even sexual orientation. We have very much diversity—racial backgrounds, biracial marriages—who are friends of ours. So for my family—that's not what I grew up in. I grew up in a very rural, predominately Catholic community, a small rural place that was very sheltered. No African-American people—I grew up in a town of 900 people—very small, conservative; basically you were a Mennonite or you were a Catholic. So for me I think it has been good because I've probably been more accommodating to different religions and more sensitive to it. I also did my student teaching and shared a classroom with a Jewish man. So I think I am probably more sensitive to that. [Is this area a predominantly Catholic community?] Lutheran, a lot of Lutheran—very, very, pretty much Lutheran, Catholic, still a lot of Methodists around here too. And we do get [diverse staff members]; in fact you've talked to one of the teachers that has a different religious background [Muslim] which was a good person to talk to. We have some diversity.

Additionally she wanted to make the point:

I think from my perspective I hope that we're open; I mean maybe I have blinders on and maybe some people aren't as open as I think they are, but I would hope that we give the impression that we're very accepting of everybody because we don't get to pick and choose who comes in our doors, so we have to be very accommodating to everybody's beliefs and that's kind of what makes the world interesting.

As with MWSC, decorations at MWSD during the two weeks prior to their Winter Recess were generally found to have a secular holiday theme. Bulletin boards throughout the school had a “Happy Holiday” focus. Few Christmas decorations were actually used, but more of a winter holiday theme with snowflakes, Santa Claus and elves. The principal at MWSD best describes his school:

Most often, you’re going to see in the environment during Christmas—this year you walked into what we had was a red, white, and blue Christmas tree. Usually there’s a Christmas tree in the foyer and then in the hallways you’re going to see your various types of holiday or winter holiday arts and crafts of Santa Claus faces to wreaths to snowflakes and just your usual Christmas nutcrackers, that type of thing.

MWSD’s principal described in detail his school system’s policy dealing with religious holidays:

Overall, we celebrate your normal Christian holidays of Christmas, Easter, and since we’re speaking specifically about Christmas, students who do not want to or parents who do not want their children to participate in any type of Christian Christmas-related activities are allowed to opt out of that. We set up space in the library for those students to carry on some sort of educational fun activity during that time. Some parents specifically request to take them home during that time and we do allow them to do that. The only board policy that does kind of pertain to this is that the board has set that only the last hour of the school day can be used for parties, so from 2 to 3 a parent knows that if there’s going to be a party it’s going to be from 2-3 and some parents do opt to take them out; but some do opt to leave them here and have the alternative activities. Activities in the classroom and parties specifically usually end up being the last day before Christmas break for that last hour. Most of the common classroom celebrations are during that last hour. Parents bring in snacks and traditional foods for the holidays. Teachers-wise, what you’re going to see in the normal daily instruction is going to be by the set curriculum but with an influence of holiday pictures or holiday characters. And I guess that’s pretty much a general look of what it looks like around here at Christmas-time. [What would one see on your bulletin boards—Happy Holidays or Merry Christmas?] A little bit of both. That’s a good question. Sometimes you see Merry Christmas; oftentimes you see Happy Holidays in our formal newsletter to parents and the marquee in front of the building. However, the board policy refers to Christmas break or actually the

board calendar usually as Winter Recess; that's how we refer to it globally when we're speaking to the community.

The principal of MWSD sees in-service training sessions dealing with religious issues as:

That is something we're going to do. We've noticed that we need in the district some training on diversity—the whole range of diversity from racial diversity to religious diversity to just training in accepting other people's thoughts and beliefs. And so that's something we plan on doing when we start off the next school year, but as of now we've not had any formal training.

The principal describes his school's diversity:

Yes, we're fairly diverse. Not as diverse as I'd like to see because I don't think we reflect the state, if you're looking at what the state population is, but we are approximately 80% white, I take that back. Probably 75% white and probably 22% black, and 2% Hispanic, and 1% Asian, and then there's a .9% under Other and here that categorizes mainly Indians from India; we do have a family that just came in this year from Pakistan, so not terribly diverse, but somewhat diverse. [Do you have any Jehovah's Witnesses?] To my knowledge, no Jehovah's Witnesses, but we do have a number of Jewish families here at the school. Actually I have a Jewish staff member, and I have two or three Jewish families who do participate. During school the students do participate in the holiday parties in the classrooms, but their parents really speak to them and talk to them and reinforce the Jewish holidays. The staff member who is Mrs. S—she actually will go class to class and present what the Jewish holiday is all about and do a little presentation to the class if they ask her to. [Does she participate in your outside of school faculty Christmas party?] She didn't this year. I think she usually does. Yes, she usually does; she not your cut-and-dried stuff.

The principal of MWSD describes his school system's current approach by saying:

Presently, kind of like I alluded to before, I don't think we've done a lot. Nor have we—we've thought about the issue, but we haven't trained or got the staff involved or the parents involved in looking at how we celebrate those holidays. In my opinion it's a very Christian-based holiday and pretty much we follow the Christian holidays. Do we say we're following Christian holidays? No, but your standard Christian holidays are what we celebrate in this school. I think like I said we have a long way to go with the diversity issue because our staff does not reflect the diversity of our student population.

The issue of a staff member proselytizing a particular religion allowed the principal to comment on how he would deal with this problem:

Although it is my 2nd year as MWSD's principal—prior to coming to MWSD I spent about 5—I spent 7 total years with 5 ½ years in administration with...[nearby major city] public schools. So I kind of had a chance—I never had a staff member preach or offer or force upon their class their religious beliefs—I have never had to deal with that, but I have had to deal with parents being upset at the fact that as a school we were celebrating Christmas, we were celebrating Easter—even Halloween (that goes the other way). So in my thoughts about—if a staff member was promoting a particular religion to the students, my first step of intervention would be to pull that staff member aside into my office one-on-one and reflect to them that, no, that is not acceptable. And explain the parameters of that and if it were to happen a second time, then I would begin the formal documentation of the discipline process which would be me restating what I had told them before, but putting it in writing and hopefully from there it wouldn't have to go any further. And action taken—I think the most severe action if it continued and wasn't remedied or the staff member continued—worse case scenario—ultimately someone could lose their job for insubordination. But we have an intensive intervention program which probably would get that person hooked up with a mentor who would then help them out there a little more.

Whether or not Christmas creates any problems for the MWSD principal brought this reply:

No, nothing major—just I think things that stand out most in my mind are parents who either are of different religious descent than Christianity or would claim to be an atheist and have no religion—or I guess you would consider that in the big picture would be their choice of religion. Dealing with parents that are upset that we are allowing Christian holidays to be celebrated in school—really it is just the parents expressing their concern. They didn't want to do anything about it. They took their child out during that last hour, but that's really the only problem I've had to deal with.

The principal also shared his thoughts on how his MWSD staff would react to any efforts on his part to promote more sensitivity:

First of all I will say that for myself the most difficult thing I've come across in my staff trying to be sensitive to different religions—is staff being ignorant—not knowing a lot about that particular religion because most of the staff members

would consider themselves Christian. So I think them not knowing a lot about a particular other religion makes them feel uncomfortable. Something that you don't know a lot about you kind of stay away from. In saying that, my staff here has been really good at allowing students that have different religious beliefs to not participate and not to hold it against them when they don't participate and things like that and work with the parents. But in reference to what you talked about our Character Education—one of our character words was having spirituality. Spirituality in the sense of—two senses for those who want to look at it religiously—spirituality between you and a Higher person. But also for those who don't have a set religion, just you, your spiritual being. How is your spirit—are you well or are you happy? I had a child who wanted to read—it wasn't a Bible story, but it was book based on a Bible story—in the classroom and the teacher wouldn't allow the student to read it to the whole class. [The teacher] just said I don't think it would be the best thing to do. You can read it in class, but you can't stand up in front of the class and read it. That upset the dad, for when I spoke to the father—it was kind of a tough one to defend, but the best way I could defend it is that we want people to recognize and celebrate spirituality and be conscious of other people's. If his daughter stood up and read a book based on the Christian Bible, I would also have to let the atheist read—I would also have to let the Ku Klux Klan member's child read...So I think that was the most difficult thing I dealt with this particular school year, but that father was real cooperative. Just that it was eye-opening to me that people do think about those things and, therefore, we need to think about those things and that goes back to training and we really need the training.

As did his colleague at MWSC, the principal at MWSD emphasized:

I believe my own religious background has helped. The reason I say that is my Christian background—growing up in a strong Christian home with strong Christian moral values has helped me understand and support the fact that there are differences and I'm not the one to judge those differences in my stay here on earth. So it has allowed me to be open-minded but with some people that can work just the opposite. I've seen that work just the opposite—where causing people to be so rigid that this is the only way to do things. So I think my background has helped.

Teachers. Neither of the two teachers at MWSC felt that Christmas created any significant problem for their school:

MWSCT1: No, I don't—as long as we cover all the major holidays and religions as far as our grade card goes. I think we need to touch on everything and not focus on one religion, especially since our population is getting more and more diverse.

Seventeen years ago I would have said absolutely not, but I'm now seeing Hindu children and Jewish children.

MWSCT2: I wouldn't say problems—interesting situations. So many kids now don't have the religious background to actually even know what the meaning of Christmas is and all of that to actually relate. Many kids don't have the background anymore to bring to us to know what to do. Obviously because of the church and state we can't teach to them what the real reason is. You know they're into presents and all this other stuff. It's not a problem; it's just a unique situation.

The MWSC teachers differed on how they felt the majority religion was treated at their school:

MWSCT1: Christianity is the majority religion—Yes [it gets extra attention]. It's the predominant religion even though technically we are not supposed to teach Christmas as a holiday in celebratory ways. I think we do.

MWSCT2: No, no, I think we try to cover a lot. We cover the Kwanzaa—we cover all the different religious holidays at Christmas time. It's not all Christian; we try to cover all of them. But again the kids come not prepared with education as far as what all the different ones [religions] are either.

Again, they had different ideas on the inclusion of religion in their teaching efforts:

MWSCT1: It's very minimal because my students have some significant special needs and mild retardation is prevailing—although it's mild. We do talk about it [Christmas]—especially when we have a *Scholastic News* or *Weekly Reader* current event. We do talk about the different religions, but it's very minor at my level. {Do you see studying religions as an issue in the higher grades?} Well, actually no, I think in regular elementary, yes, but in Special Education classes especially at the Kindergarten level the comprehension of students—we teach at a more concrete level. Abstract things are just out of their realm.

MWSCT2: You really can't do the religion, but what you can do is model. You can model the right way to do things. Hopefully by your modeling you're setting examples by being a role model for a lot of these kids who will pick up on that.

The two teachers did see the legal limitations of religion and public schools in similar ways:

MWSCT1: Personally, no, I don't. I really don't know what the legal ramifications are. I just know what our district policy is and there has never been any person who says, no, you can't teach this or you have to teach that. So it's been pretty open.

MWSCT2: No, I think in...[our Midwestern state] we just got the okay to have a moment of silence. Then that's up to the kids to do. If they feel they want to do a silent prayer, that's fine. We had never had it [the moment of silence]. Our typical morning is the pledge and that's pretty much it and you get on with the day. But I think after 9/11 [September 11, 2001 acts of terrorism] things kind of took on a different perspective and I know we had a lot of activities around 9/11 to try to pull the community together. A lot of that was moment of prayer—moment of silence—reflecting for the victims of 9/11. I know our state legislative body has examined that and said, "Well, you know we can do the moment of silence." But are we doing it now? No, but that was only said a few weeks ago that we could. [Do you feel legally limited?] Yes, there is definitely a division of church and state. You don't bring religion into the classroom.

Neither of the MWSC teachers was aware of any criticism that had been directed towards the approach they have taken in their classrooms:

MWSCT1: No, I'm not aware of any. [Have you had any special training to deal with diverse issues?] Not concerning religion. [Would you like to have any training like that?] Sure.

MWSCT2: I don't think so because we learned over the years what we can and cannot do. We can learn where the line is drawn—where you can't step over. [Have you had any problems with Jehovah's Witnesses?] We have had over the years. We have had a few kids who were Jehovah's Witnesses and it's not just Christmas—it's any holidays—not even birthday parties. So we've made arrangements with the kids to not participate, and it's never been a problem. They seem to be okay with it. Again, it's not the strictness in a lot of cases. In all my years of teaching I might have had two or three at the most, which is not a lot for 22 years.

The MWSC teachers again had different reactions to the question on how their parents have responded over the years to the inclusion or exclusion of Christmas in their classrooms:

MWSCT1: It's been years ago. I did have a child whose parents were fundamental Christians—they observed Christmas, but Santa Claus and things

like that they were totally opposed to. They did write a letter stating that they didn't want any type of artwork that had a Santa Claus. [Were they like the Jehovah's Witnesses?] They were not Jehovah's Witnesses—actually it was a sect of Mennonites, but I'm not exactly sure what it was since it was probably 15 years ago.

MWSCT2: No, everybody is okay with what we do because we don't do a lot. I think we adhere to it [separation of church and state] very well here in the North. Not being from the Bible Belt and not really being involved in what goes on there, I think we are quite different up here.

Asking whether or not the two teachers at MWSC supported the idea of getting a local board policy to help them with holidays like Christmas brought about these reactions:

MWSCT1: I think some guidelines [would help]. I don't think we have very many guidelines written out. I think if we had something like that it would help us understand what we can and cannot cover.

MWSCT2: Well, I guess I would have to define how stringent the policy would be. I do think that if we were allowed, it would be real nice for us—not to teach religion so much because there is the option here that a lot of people choose and that's to go to a Catholic or private school where they actually teach religion. We have several in the area [private schools]—we have several high schools—we also have elementary schools. I think we have two male high schools in...[large Midwestern city nearby]—one's a Jesuit and another Catholic. We have one coed Catholic high school and we have two Catholic girls' high schools. Their enrollments are high. We have several elementary schools. We do lose some kids there. But they teach religion, and we don't, and I don't know that I would ever want to teach religion in public schools. But I think just a general Christian knowledge would be good.

Neither teacher at MWSC remembered anyone ever trying to get them to display or distribute religious materials through their classrooms:

MWSCT1: No, I haven't been asked.

MWSCT2: Not at school, but at home obviously we have the Jehovah's Witnesses doing their witnessing. I can't say that has ever happened at school. [Did you ever have the Gideons distribute Bibles to 5th graders?] No. I used to

teach in...[a nearby northern state] and in neither of my school districts have I ever been approached with any type of religious materials.

Again, the two MWSC teachers had similar reactions to parents questioning them about their personal religious beliefs:

MWSCT1: No, they haven't—I'm not so certain that they know [that I'm Islamic]—I'm not opposed to them knowing at all. In fact, I would welcome that. Especially in this time I think there is so much misinformation. I would absolutely welcome it.

MWSCT2: Let me think—22 years is a long time—I don't think so. But I think too after you're with their child so long they pretty much know who you are. And they know if you are some kind of radical believer in something or they know you're just a normal believer. I think obviously your actions speak louder than any words would ever do. So I can't say any parents have ever said "What is your religion?" I do attend church—I do see a lot of parents and kids that go to my church because I go to a huge non-denominational church. And I see a lot—I have one little girl who is in my class and I see her and her parents there every week. We are building a new building and she came to me Monday because I saw her Sunday. And Sunday there was a tour of the new building and she came to me Monday and said, "Did you see the new church?" I said I did and I said, "It's awesome." I said, "Did you?" And she said, "No, we didn't get a chance to go over there." That's probably about all I get. If the kids see me at church, they will then talk about it during the week. They will usually mention something during the week. But it's only the kids that I would see at my church.

The three teachers at MWSD provided answers to the researcher's questions very similar to their colleagues at MWSC. All three of the teachers did not feel that Christmas created any problem for them:

MWSDT1: No, some [non-Christian] students have a problem understanding why during the holidays a religious type movie is shown or a totally religious oriented program. They go to the library or they go elsewhere if their parents choose for them not to participate. Most of the time [Christmas presentations] it's kind of entertainment in itself and it's not ultra-Christian. So most of the time those kids—we even have Jehovah's Witnesses exclude themselves. But to say it's a problem within teaching—it's not. I used to teach Social Studies and we studied some religions, but basically Jewish and Arabic-Islamic people. We visited the Mosque, and we explained all three recognized Super Beings and that Mohammed

is just a prophet and they feel that Jesus was a prophet, and yet we believe he is the son of [God]. And, of course, the Jews believe he is not here yet, but keep your eyes open. They all accept the fact that we all—I have never had any questions about it and yet little kids will say, “I’m glad we’re Christians.” So as far as does [Christmas] create any problems—no, it doesn’t. And of the problems I have already mentioned, Jehovah Witnesses feel we don’t need all the hoopla that goes with Christmas, and yet they’re Christians.

MWSDT2: No, it actually does not and I do try to talk a lot to the kids about what their traditions are through the holiday season to see where they come from. I try to get to know the kids really well before I put anything up front. I tend to—I’m going ahead, but I tend to not—I really believe in Christmas and the meaning behind it and truly celebrate it. I don’t mind that my children know my traditions and my beliefs. But I also let them know that’s not the only set of beliefs. If there are actually children in our class [with other religious beliefs], then we absolutely include that—just explain about traditions. That’s a great integration for doing everything you do in the classroom. But also even if the children are not in the class I do read stories about the holidays that are celebrated that the children know about. You know that they’ll hear something about on them TV or read something about them. And we talk about what traditions other people are celebrating or using at this time. [What grade level do you teach?] I teach 1st grade. [Do you feel you have any problems here?] Actually, no, I haven’t because I think before I act. I make sure I understand what my population is in my classroom—what their beliefs are before I do anything, but I never teach the holiday—we just share what people are doing at this time. It’s kind of a current events type thing.

MWSDT3: I don’t think it brings about a problem in my classroom. If anything, it gives us an opportunity to talk about—compare and contrast cultures in our curriculum especially cultures in...[our Midwest state]. Basically we start with that and by the time Christmas rolls around we talk about different traditions and cultures in the different areas of...[our state] that are predominate. And how it affects the different housing—the type of housing and then we talk about the different religions that are brought from the different areas. So it actually kind of enhances our curriculum because it is a good example. We take that and then I talk about the different ways we’ll celebrate Christmas. We call it the Winter holidays because we talk about Hanukkah, we talk about Christmas, we talk about Kwanzaa. We even do Christmas around the world where each student picks a country, and they research how they celebrate Christmas, and they did presentations and brought in food and they did a trifle board. It was really kind of eye-opening for them—oh, they would say they don’t have the same traditions. I just use it as an opportunity to help them realize that—they are so in the here and now—they think that what they do everyone does. So it’s a good opportunity for me to show them it’s not. It’s kind of touch and go too because they are at the age

that I think some of them still want to believe in Santa Claus—they all pretty much know by 4th grade.

Two of the three teachers at MWSD did not feel that the majority religion in the area received any extra attention. The third teacher didn't fully commit to a "yes" or "no" to the question. Their answers do show the complexity of the issue:

MWSDT1: Does it get any extra attention—actually some rooms have a tree—we normally have a tree for those who are [Christian]. Of course, as you know we have a Winter break as opposed to Christmas vacation. Same thing with Spring break and Easter vacation.

MWSDT2: No, I don't because even if we say it's a Christmas party—it's really just the last day before the break. You know some classes—let's celebrate! It's more like—we're not celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ—it's nothing like that—it's basically what else could you possibly do with the kids two hours before the break. I don't feel that the actual holiday is celebrated.

MWSDT3: No, because I don't really talk about religion. When I do talk about religion I talk about it as a choice—a variety of religions. It's funny because I remember one year some kids said this is religion and you can't talk about religion. I said we are talking about all types of religions fairly. [And I offered] that if you have a type of religion you would like to discuss, we can research that too. I'm very open like that in my classroom. Even in the Pledge of Allegiance I have never had—it hasn't been brought up—the issue of "under God." I even have had some kids right after 9/11 that after they said the Pledge of Allegiance would say "Amen" afterwards. It was kind of funny, but this one kid shouted it out. You know he was just feeling a social sense of pride.

All three of the MWSD teachers included religion in some way in their classrooms:

MWSDT1: My thoughts and feelings concerning teaching about religions are that it's not a problem. It's almost—I would have to say it's necessary because it eliminates all the questions. In the last six years of teaching I start with the religion unit. So we were there before all this happened. Now and then because we have so many new citizens or people waiting for citizenship or whatever, these new citizens don't know the significance of Thanksgiving. Yet we explained that to them and they accept it. Then, of course, there are many different countries that

have special events that you can compare and help the newcomers to understand others' celebrations.

MWSDT2: More or less through shared reading and experiences and through the children's discussions. Through the children explaining what their traditions are and then through me perhaps reading or having other people come in. We have a Jewish teacher on staff and so she would come in and explain. I even have had the class create a bulletin board which was winter holidays or December holidays and we showed what different people are doing. So that type of thing. [Is there any study of religion in the curriculum?] No, no, speaking of [religion] at all.

MWSDT3: I like to feel my kids can talk about whatever they want in my classroom even if it has to do with them and their religion or it has to do with where they want to go to church. I have kids come in and say, "Oh, guess what, Ms. D., I was confirmed this weekend" and we'll talk about what that means. I like for them to be able to celebrate whatever they want in my classroom. If it's important to them, it's important to me. I think that as far as religion I welcome any—I want them to feel comfortable practicing any religion in my classroom—not practicing in my room, but outside the classroom. I don't like to shy away from it. If it comes up in a conversation, we'll talk about it.

All three MWSD teachers had different interpretations on how church and state legal limitations impacted their teaching:

MWSDT1: Legal limitations on exclusion of religion—oh, I don't know. [Have you had any special training on dealing with religions in the classroom?] On what we are allowed to say or do? No, I haven't had any special training. We base our actions on court cases. If you want to know my feelings—I believe we could spend our time with something a little more important without sounding too shallow. That's the quickest way to say it. No, because it so easily handled. Kids are not as caught up in all these little trivial things that are so important to a small group, especially now we've got a lot more things to worry about.

MWSDT2: No, not really—through public policy, through university classes when you try going back—so, no—actually not. I think it's just understood that we're not allowed to teach our religion to the children. You can share different religious beliefs, but you can't try to push your religion on the children.

MWSDT3: I never feel I'm biased towards one religion or another. I don't ever feel any [legal limitations]. They always feel like they can openly talk when we get into a conversation. One kid starts talking about something—and usually it's not during teaching time—except when we get to the cultures. We talk about

Amish—compare and contrast Shakers, Mennonites. We talk about that a little bit, but I think they realize that there isn't any legal issue as long as you respect everyone's different cultures and religions. It's not like I'm teaching to one—I'm teaching to educate them all in a cultural and traditional aspect. So I don't feel I'm stepping on any illegal grounds.

All three teacher interviewees from MWSD did not remember any parents ever questioning how they handled Christmas in their classrooms:

MWSDT1: No, I've never had any problems in the way I approach Christmas. And my approach to minorities and different religions—that I have mentioned—wasn't, you know, made to make anyone to feel out of place.

MWSDT2: No, because I have been very careful about it—because I know that something, I guess that everything, you do in the classroom you have to stop and reflect and think about before you move forward. You don't want to do anything that's going to cause problems and religion is one that very easily could. So, no, because I have always been very careful. And another thing is that I try to include a lot about the community and try to talk to the kids about how we can help the community. The past few years I have adopted two children through my church with my classroom. It's totally volunteer—completely volunteer—so that we are giving Christmas presents because that's what they [the adopted children] celebrate and the kids understand that. It's very easy because most of the kids in the classroom celebrate Christmas as well. So they understand that we talk about what the traditions are. Yes, we are giving Christmas presents, but to the kids it's the way that 1st graders and their families can be community helpers.

MWSDT3: I remember one person coming in and saying something—I think they were [conservative Christians]...wrote me in their Agenda Book. I communicate daily [with parents] in their Agenda Book. [The parent said] Oh, it's great to see someone actually address religion or God in the classroom or something like that. So for her she is obviously a very religious person, and she was glad to see we even addressed it at all. That's the only thing I have ever had, and it was a positive note. I too along with that like to stress morals in general—being a good citizen. What is being a good citizen in the classroom? And that ties in thoroughly with government—I squeeze in morals and religion in a variety of ways. [Do you decorate your classroom around Christmas?] Not really, I don't even do like a tree. We had our trifle boards with Christmas Around the World. I don't really decorate for a lot of things—I may hang up a couple of things even for Halloween. I do fun packets, but they will be about Hanukkah, Kwansaa packets—so we'll have different things all related to that.

None of the three teachers from MWSD had any memory of ever being criticized for including or excluding Christmas in their classrooms:

MWSDT1: No, I have never had parents question my approach to Christmas.

MWSDT2: No, not at all. I just think that teachers need to be very careful because it is a diverse population out there and that we do everything that we can to make it a better place to be.

MWSDT3: No, I've never really been questioned about Christmas in my classroom. [Have you had any training in dealing with religious or diversity issues?] No, I have never had any training [on religious issues]. Not to digress, but you asked me if I had any diversity training—I went to a diversity training two or three years ago. Basically, it was being made aware of different religions and cultures. It was eye-opening for me because when she was asking me questions—like we had this one thing where she asked us to list as many—she had all these ethnicity groups on this paper—she asked to list as many famous people as you know under those cultures. It was different—I'm just awful with names anyway—so for me to remember a name for what race they are—is really hard for me. So it made me realize that when I go into my classroom and the kids are researching famous...[Midwesterners of our state] or whatever, that they should have a good mix to choose from people who are male and female and different races. I don't think there were any Hispanic or Latino people who were famous [Midwesterners of our state]. I kind of need to go with what books are available—I try to give them a better mix. So that was eye-opening for me for that and a lot of it [diversity training] is talking about ideas of what you do in the classroom at the beginning of the year. So you get to know your kids...I educate myself based on the kids who come in my room. If I find out that—I don't know much about the Muslim religion, but if I know that I have one, I would find out more about that. I know I have had a Jehovah's Witness. [Are there any Muslims in this school?] No, in...[the large Midwestern city nearby], but not in this district. We actually had a student teacher here who just left that was Muslim. That was pretty neat—she talked a lot to her classes about that [Islamic religion]. She taught them how to write their names in Arabic and stuff so it was kind of cool. She was here during the time of 9/11 too. So it was nice to have her in our building.

None of the three teachers from MWSD felt a more specific local policy would have much to offer:

MWSDT1: Concerning our local policy on religion—I think it’s working or they would have changed it. You’re bound to get criticism at any time about anything, as you know—anything from the way a new car rides or someone has reason to complain about something. Some people spend their entire lives worried about unimportant issues rather than looking inside their house that looks like a pig sty—how’s that?!

MWSDT2: I don’t believe we need a policy in this particular location. I don’t see [religious holidays] as being a problem here. Personally, I wish that children had some type of formal religion in their life because I think that would really help a lot of the families to have a better outlook on life. However, I would never say that to a parent, but as far as at school here I feel it’s an issue if someone is pushing their religion or really highlighting it.

MWSDT3: I don’t know what the local policy is. [I found out from your Director of Schools that there is not a local written policy.] I knew that—that’s why I didn’t know about effectiveness—[laughter] because there isn’t one!

Two of the three teachers did not remember anyone approaching them to display or distribute religious materials in their classrooms. The third teacher did remember the distribution of Bibles by the Gideons in years past. All three explained their reactions to this idea:

MWSDT1: Not within the classroom—at one time we used to have a group come to bring us a Bible for the classroom. [Was that the Gideons?] It might have been; it was years and years ago and how that was stopped I’m not sure. And there was at one time when a local Veterans of Foreign Wars’ group would bring the American flag and give to us. But now I think they are all ordered through the state—I don’t remember how they do that—it was kind of a cool presentation at one time. Those presentations may come back due to 9/11. We’ve gotten so apathetic for awhile—just yesterday (I don’t know if you went to any of the Memorial Day Parades) they were very well attended. It reminded me of when I was in grade school when in this area we put crepe paper through bicycle spoke tires. This area has gone to being a city from a very tiny town. It was neat to see it again. I’ve not been approached other than what I mentioned about the Gideons. Maybe no one else in this building would even remember that because they are all just too young.

MWSDT2: At school—no, no. They can't—no, never. It's a different world in Tennessee, but that's a nice world though—I think it would be nice—it just seems to be more calm or something. It's just seems like a real healthy place to live.

MWSDT3: No, if I were approached I don't think I would because if you pass out one person's Bible or whatever—aren't you saying (not that you're promoting), but unless you're going pass out them all in public school—you don't pass them out. If I had one from all the churches, I would. Although they [my students] have enough in their lockers now!

Only one of the three interviewees at MWSD had ever been asked by parents about her religious beliefs:

MWSDT1: No, I have never had parents ask me about my religious beliefs. I think if they were curious and they questioned their kids—their children would know that I was Christian. At the same time they would also know I don't proselytize. Over the years state and church issues have never been a problem at this school.

MWSDT2: Yes, I have had some very strong Christian families—they will ask me about it. But I have no problem telling them how I feel—I just feel it's not my place to try to talk the kids into...[believing in a religion]. Kids will say to me things about it at Christmas time—"isn't that right, Mrs. G., that's Jesus' birthday." And I will say, "Well, yes, that is what some religions believe." You know, that type of a thing So, yes, I don't have a problem speaking—telling parents because I feel like I wouldn't be here and have my beautiful kids and wonderful family if it was [not] for that [my religion].

MWSDT3: No, I have never been asked.

Parents. Parents of both Midwestern schools had a great deal to say about how Christmas fits into their schools:

MWSCP1: For me it doesn't—for my children it doesn't. But I do know there are children here at this school that because of their religions have to exclude themselves from the Christmas celebrations—any of them—any celebrations of any sorts. They're kind of stuck sitting in the office feeling left out. As a parent I feel bad for that child because that child knows that these fun things are going on and they're stuck sitting and being left out of it. They don't even get to stay home for the day and I think that is sad for those children, but at the same time that's their family's religion. Therefore, they are abiding by it, but it's not fair to them.

MWSCPa2: Well, the only thing my child noticed is that they don't celebrate Christmas here and he was used to celebrating Christmas at his former [a private Christian] school. They have a Christmas party, but it's totally commercial. Nothing religious is done here.

MWSCPa3: I'm trying to think if it does create any kind of a dilemma—from the principal's standpoint it might a little bit. Other holidays definitely do. It's funny: Halloween more so than Christmas. Because this is a fairly religious area too—heavily religious area, I think. I'm from the West, California, and religions are really pushed way on the back burner here. I think it is less so here. I think there is less attention paid to being politically correct. I think a lot of faculty and parents are very religious. I don't know if they keep it completely separate in the classroom. I don't think there is a problem here though. I've been involved with the parents' group here at this school and normally our activities—we do think about. We do have Christmas functions here. We do have Christmas musicals. Our parents' group has what we have called in the past a Gingerbread Shop where children actually come in and buy little things for their families. The shop is fairly non-religious in nature. We don't call it a Christmas Shop, but we call it the Gingerbread Shop. I don't think there's a big problem [with Christmas]. I think it's easily handled. Sometimes in the musicals there seems to be a little bit of religion—maybe I'm wrong there; I'm thinking more of the upper schools. Here it's pretty balanced.

MWSDPa1: I don't think it really causes much of a dilemma. I think there is a lot of diversity in our school, and we know that, and we thrive on that actually. I do know if there is a party kids go down to the library or somewhere if the parent has requested that the child is not to be in the celebration. And we try not to call it Christmas party, but a holiday party. I believe that is pretty much what we call it—a holiday party. Because of the stigma of what Christmas means versus—although I know that we see even signs of Hanukkah from time to time. I know there is a lot of research done in the classrooms. My son was asked what are some traditions for the holiday time, and so every child no matter what walk of life gave traditions of what a holiday time is. So even though Christmas...would be what we celebrate as our holiday, it would be celebrated differently [in other places]—we still have traditions that brought it together. So we went over traditions, and that was really interesting to find out what was mostly...giving and receiving—that kind of thing. But I know that there is a lot—I don't know how to actually say it—I think everybody is pretty much open, I think, in our area anyway. There are some other districts closer in to the city that probably have more of an issue with this kind of thing. So far especially being elementary, it doesn't seem to be too much of an issue.

MWSDPa2: Well, I see it as active participation in the school in regards to Christmas and its celebration. I think the dilemma comes from the religion part. Lack of the cohesiveness between the church and I might as well say—the state. With them [the state] not infringing on the violation of the.... school. Orders and stuff that the state-ordered mandates would be infringing upon people's religion. It's a damper—I think the children should be taught parts—you know—religion as regards to Jesus. And what the significance is rather than concentrating on the gift exchange and the hyperbole Santa Claus and things like that. I think you can see that there is a difference between a parochial school and a public school in regards to celebrating Christmas.

All five Midwestern parents had strong opinions about what was happening in their children's classrooms as related to Christmas:

MWSCPa1: Well, I know they have a party for one afternoon—the later part of an afternoon. They do other activities—some worksheets and things. [Do they have Christmas bulletin boards?] They decorate their classrooms and everything—and they kind of gear their assignments around the holidays or the holiday type tunes. So they are geared toward that. [Is it secular or religious oriented?] No, it's not religious, but more secular. The Santa Claus and that type of theme, not the nativity type approach.

MWSCPa2: My child's teacher doesn't include Christmas at all in the classroom. Nothing religious.

MWSCPa3: Yes, but I've noticed the last several years they have also talked about something called Kwanzaa and other religious groups as they try to balance it.

MWSDPa1: They've made like decorations for a Christmas tree, and it wouldn't be anything that really had Santa or anything. It would be like a wreath with a picture in the middle—something like that was nice to take home as gift. So whether they put it on a tree or hung it on the refrigerator or whatever they choose to do, it was still just a gift.

MWSDPa2: Within their guidelines—yes—like I said they're walking the fence staying within the principle [state and church separation], the school board itself, or against the state. It's a gray area for them, but I'm sure they know where they're supposed to stand on that.

The five parents from the two Midwestern schools had a variety of reactions to the question of parental concerns within their schools:

MWSCPa1: I guess I think Christmas is too commercialized anyway, so I think it should be less emphasized. I think that of most of the holidays. I think it should be less—yes, it is fun for them to have a party and have something to be excited about, but I think holidays are so commercialized as it is. Most of the kids don't even know the true meaning of any of these holidays anymore.

MWSCPa2: I'm not sure about that—because I know there are a couple of different religions involved—some Jewish kids. I don't think it hurts the kids to know why they are having the holiday—rather than just having time off. They treat it more like a winter break than a Christmas break. It's not referred to as Christmas—it's a Winter Break. It just happens to fall at Christmas time.

MWSCPa3: No, I haven't heard any. [Do you think it's the right balance here?] I think so—yes.

MWSDPa1: Actually, we've been able to keep it pretty good. It's [a Christmas party] the day that they leave [for Winter Break]—it's not like they celebrated all week or anything like that. Now there might be Christmas issues—now I know that one class did a study on Christmas Santas and how that tradition started and how or who he really was or started out to be, which showed diversity right there. Because in reality the first Santa Claus was a person who had nothing, but gave to the poor. He had absolutely nothing, and he did give out gifts, but, of course, we know how that has evolved. That was real interesting in how they did that [Santa research]. I'm not aware of any community concerns. As a parent, as long as it's not dwelled upon—you know we don't bring in the issue of Jesus or how that all came about. That's not brought into the schools. Pretty much it's just the holiday traditional type thing that we hit upon—family-oriented traditions.

MWSDPa2: Like I stated earlier, I would like that they would have school prayer. Currently the high school has like a morning vigil at the flag pole, and they do open prayer out there. Those who want to participate—it's not intrusive. They don't force anybody to participate. Full freedom—you can walk by the flag pole—and you don't have to participate.

Clearly, the system's curriculum does have some religious material presented in the upper grades' social studies lessons, yet the parents' reaction from the two schools

indicates that only a limited amount of religious information is provided. The key issue to parents seemed to be making sure the religious information was balanced for all groups:

MWSCPa1: As long as they cover all of them. Although my family is of one particular religion—if they are going to talk about it at all, they need to briefly touch on all religions. There are many different beliefs, and they need to say this religion's beliefs are this and this religion's belief is this. Again, I don't believe that specifically one religion should be covered. If they are going to [include religion], they need to cover them all. [Where would you see that it is appropriate to include religion in public schools?] I think if they wait to middle school or higher it will be too late. I think they should learn here because my own children have come home and said they don't understand what this means and why so and so was not celebrating this—what's that all about? For example, the Jewish holidays might be their loss if they're not taught what it is, and they don't question me. Luckily, I will explain it to my children, but some parents may not. I don't think children should be kept in the dark of what's around in the world.

MWSCPa2: Yes, I do think it should because I think that's part of our problem in this world—we don't understand one another. And religion is the basis of it. Education will help kids to learn why people do what they do. Because it's not the way they were raised or their beliefs, you still have to have respect for someone else's beliefs even if you don't agree with it. If you don't know anything, you can't respect anything.

MWSCPa3: Possibly, I don't know how much they even really talk about religion. I don't think there is enough time in their curriculum, in their daily work.

MWSDPa1: I'm not aware of any [religious information] in the classroom. Not yet anyway. My oldest son is in the 5th grade. So far (and that's the highest we go here) he hasn't studied religions.

MWSDPa2: I think—one thing I did notice in the school programs—they're now mentioning Hanukkah and Kwanzaa along with the normal United States' practices of Christmas—Santa Claus. This is really nice to open your eyes to different cultural celebrations for Christmas. And to be aware that there is not just the United States' celebration. There are other countries that celebrate in a different fashion and are called different things. And it's [Christmas], not just a one day celebration.

The interviewer perceived a lack of unity by parents on whether they felt school staff members put too much or not enough accent on Christmas in the classrooms of their children:

MWSCP1: I think they can go too far. I think if they really play it [Christmas] up, then again those children who have to be excluded from it don't understand for whatever reason. If they celebrate Jewish holidays they're being excluded from some of it—if they are going too far. People who choose not to have any holidays—they too are being excluded. If the teacher goes overboard, then that child is really missing out on a lot.

MWSCP2: Well, Christmas and Hanukkah fall at the same time and you can do both. And do the Muslims have something occur during this time? A lot of religions have events that occur at this time—you could address it right without going too far. But ignoring it is a problem.

MWSCP3: Yes, as far as the spectrum—both ways. I think sometimes that ignoring things is ridiculous—the political correctness is too far in some cases.

MWSDP1: No, they have pretty much kept that at medium—a good balance. And like I said, if a child's parent has requested not to attend that party—it's not like they're bad. They don't have to sit in the office. Other arrangements are made for their child to be in the library. I happened to be in the library when a couple of them came in one day. All they wanted was to have fun with the other kids. They had no idea why they had to be separate. And that was sad because they really didn't know. So we tried to make it a positive experience for them to be away from everybody else. But that was tough.

MWSDP2: I really haven't noticed that—to be honest with you—they do have a Christmas program which is nice, a musical program which does not go overboard. It's like I said, it's pretty neutral compared with what you'll probably hear on the radio. This presentation would be part of their program versus what you would hear in church. They try to balance it.

Similar to their reactions to the previous question, the parents had a variety of answers as to what should be displayed on bulletin boards during the Christmas season:

MWSCP1: My personal belief? Yes, they can be used to display religious topics if they keep it where they are even with all of them. If you asked my husband the same question, he would say absolutely not. We differ on that very strongly. He feels that school should not cover anything religious. I'm just the opposite. I think sometimes it's the only way some kids will learn about any of them [religions].

MWSCP2: I don't know that I would do "Merry Christmas," but I would definitely do a board. If you do "Merry Christmas" you can do "Happy Hanukkah." You could provide a balance—right now there is no balance. We just pretend it doesn't exist. So we will not do it. I came from the opposite end—we

came from a Christian school. Church is very important to us. My son has talked about becoming a missionary, so it is something very close to him. Sometimes this all bothers him because he is almost afraid to say anything because before [at the Christian school] he could say what he believed. He would say that's not the way Jesus would do it or what God wants. Here he can't do that, and he is almost afraid now to say anything. And I don't think they should be afraid to say their feelings. He hasn't gotten into any trouble; it's just a personal feeling he gets. He has some autism—so he over-analyzes this stuff.

MWSCP3: I haven't gone into all the classrooms to look. I don't believe that they put crosses and things like that up. I just don't think they do. On our parent bulletin boards—we just have snowflakes, trees and things like that. We don't go into the nativity look or things like that. Sometimes we use "Merry Christmas." I haven't heard any parents complain either. It's not really a big issue. It's more the Wintertime theme that we do.

MWSDPa1: I don't know—we've pretty much gone to "Happy Holidays." That way it is a broader spectrum which includes everyone. Of course, I think people will say "Merry Christmas" to each other and "have a nice Christmas." So for the most part that is spoken, but as far as "Merry Christmas" [on bulletin boards]—I don't believe I've seen it. You see "Happy Holidays." I'm sure as a diverse school system we've decided that there is enough diversity to keep it at a medium. [More sensitive?] Yeah, right. I still think it's important that we still recognize the faith, whatever it may be or whatever walk of life it is. So I know religion is a very sensitive topic, but it is also a topic over the years that isn't spoken about much, and it really should be. I don't know that we need to go back to having—we do have Christian schools that take care of that part of your subject. I do remember being a kid too, and we did the Pledge of Allegiance, and we did things that were more oriented towards religion that you can't do now. [Do you think studying different religions would be a problem?] I think to be aware of the fact that there are different religions would be wonderful as long as you are not centered on just one. But to let children know that there is all that out there. A lot of kids don't go to church anymore. So this may be one of the only ways they can figure it out, and it is a learning tool.

MWSDPa2: You see more Christmas colors—more activities—snowflakes are put up. I don't know—you may see more because it's a more joyous occasion for children. Not that they have pictures of Jesus or Mary. [Do you see "Merry Christmas" on the bulletin boards?] To be honest with you I see mostly "Season's Greetings" rather than "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holidays." This is one neutral approach; it's a coverall. I'm from an Hispanic background—my dad was a deacon in the church—traditionally we would learn all the songs, even the Latin version of "Oh, Come All Ye Faithful." But in regards to the public

schools—they are walking on thin ice, for some say “yes” and some say “no” and you have the conflict of religion and state. I’m a police officer and we recently had a conflict with one of the courthouses displaying the Ten Commandments. They said there is a conflict here between church and state. So they had to move the Ten Commandments over to the corner. I said, “Oh, come on—we have money that has ‘In God We Trust’ and our Pledge of Allegiance ‘under God.’” Our anthems mention a deity. I know Rome fell because there was a conflict. The commandments issue was solved without a court case.

Information Gathered from Resources Outside the Schools

In addition to collecting data from those most directly connected to the school situation, the researcher also contacted those within the communities, both local and national, who had reason to be responsive to the Christmas dilemma. These sources included those in the clergy as well as one nationally known defender of First Amendment issues. Their insights might help a school leader gain a sense of the larger context within which conflicts might take place as well as ideas applicable to any efforts made toward resolution.

Perspectives from Four Religious Leaders

Protestants. The Reverend Darris Doyal, a Protestant minister in Maryville, Tennessee, clarified his position on Christmas in public schools:

Christmas is not just a religious celebration, but is a cultural expression of the meaning of giving, caring, love and sharing. Even though it is an explicit recognition of the birth of Jesus, it also embodies a spirit of the best in human community and relationship building. Schools should not coerce celebration or specifically require any teacher or student to participate in a sectarian holiday, but to deny the reality of this major event [Christmas] in the life of our country would be remiss. Acknowledge? Absolutely. Endorse or require? Absolutely not.

Reverend Doyal also saw the study of religion as part of a full education:

In order to provide the most elementary liberal arts education, religion cannot be ignored whether the discipline being studied is History, Literature, Arts, Architecture, Ethics, Economics, Music or Ideas. To exclude the influence of

religion on the development of any or all of these areas would be to eliminate education itself. Religion can be investigated, studied, acknowledged and evaluated without pursuing a doctrinal submission.

His position on the curriculum does not, however, include proselytizing. In response to a question about educators taking on the role of advocates for a particular religion, Doyal said:

A church is an entity whose very purpose is to persuade a particular point. No church or any agency thereof should be allowed a format to espouse a particular viewpoint or doctrine within the public school arena. Any leader that violates this should be held accountable.

Although Doyal has not been directly involved in setting up the study of religion in public schools, he offered some specific suggestions on what he felt were appropriate means of study:

I have had little direct contact in developing a specific program to include religious studies. Most areas of the United State now have enough diversity to warrant such a program. Public schools have an obligation to support learning to live with tolerance, inclusion, exchange of ideas and multicultural interaction. These are not learned in a vacuum. Open forums, panels with broad representation, field trips to mosques, synagogues, churches and other places of worship allow students to demythologize perceptions and form opinions based on facts, not prejudice or ignorance.

Doyal further clarified his position on religion in schools:

A school system that would have a policy that forbids the mentioning of religious holidays would be a system that ignores reality. This does not model a very worthy or sophisticated learning paradigm. In many respects the celebration of Martin Luther King Day is an acknowledgment of a religious figure, thus a religious holiday. His motivation was based on his religious beliefs and to separate that fact from his achievement in the area of civil rights would be utterly remiss.

While stressing the role religion has in the educational process, Reverend Doyal also supported the concept of separation of church and state. He detailed the limits and the complexities of trying to blend the roles of church and school:

I am adamantly opposed to Bible reading and required prayer in public school. Prayer is a personal enterprise which cannot be prescribed. Corporate prayer is a choice rightly made by an individual who chooses to place him/herself in that environment. Bible reading as an act of devotion is best done in a home or church environment with that supportive community. In a public school whose prayer should be prayed? From what posture? In what language? No one can be forbidden to pray in one's own mind or heart. This can be done anywhere and at any time and requires no granting of permission. The public school is not and should not be in this business.

Doyal takes a moderate approach to Christmas in public schools. His perspective could help educators understand the subtleties within controversies over religion and religious holidays in public elementary schools.

Kenneth Bossart, a Protestant minister outside the Southeast, provided a number of insights on how he viewed a public school's role in the church and state debate. In answering whether Christmas should be acknowledged in public schools, he responded:

Yes, I do believe Christmas should be acknowledged in public schools. The writers of our Constitution advocated freedom "Of" religion, not "From" religion. There should be a free flow of conversation regarding religious holidays, celebrations and observances. The mere mention of a religious occasion is not necessarily indicating a preference for a particular religion or belief.

Similar to Doyal, Bossart believed public schools should include the study of religion in their curricula. He stressed the way public schools should be careful not to deny students a full overview of the ways religious views have shaped human history:

Yes, I believe there is a need for our public schools to include religion at least in the study of history. When religion is studied historically we learn to appreciate it as an integral part of our past. It is impossible to properly study history apart from religious history. The political, social and economic history of every continent

and nation is intertwined with religious history. Try to study the history of Great Britain, the Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire or any other nation without having some understanding of the part that religion played. It would be a grossly incomplete understanding.

Additionally, it is extremely difficult to separate any teaching of psychology, sociology, philosophy, ethics or any tenets of a moral code from some underpinning of “natural law” in its opinion making. Out of what ethos do we teach proper social and ethical behavior? That appears to be a problem today in many of our schools.

He added, on the other hand, action should be taken if an educator mishandles state and church separation:

If a school leader denies a student the privilege of expressing their faith in such a way that is not offensive to others, that leader should be disciplined. This would include but not be limited to personal silent prayer, pious gestures, or reading religious materials while on free time. I believe that is the opposite of what your question intends to ask. However, similarly, if a school leader forces or somehow coerces a student to participate in a religious activity that is offensive to that person, they should likewise be disciplined. Again, mere conversation of religion, etc. would not necessarily be considered a violation of the state/church barrier.

A question on the specific organization of a model public school program brought out the following response from the minister:

I have not had any experience with a public school that has had a successful approach to teaching religion to a diverse population. The school system in which our children are students has a very large majority of people who identify with the Christian faith. Their musical programs at “holiday” times reflect the majority population. There has been little, if any, conversation that has taken place regarding these programs and their mentioning of religious characters and the use of religious language.

He also wondered why some public school systems have stopped naming school vacation days after religious holidays and sees such changes as an over-reaction:

In recent years, our local school system has eliminated their naming of days off school after religious holidays. There is no longer a “Christmas” or “Easter” break. They are “winter” and “spring” breaks. It just seems odd that they still fall on the same Christian holidays. The schools try to be sensitive and “politically

correct” so as not to offend those who do not practice the Christian faith. It is ridiculous and probably unconstitutional to have a policy that does not allow the mentioning of religious holiday. I am unaware of any schools that follow that policy.

Additionally, Bossart offered his thoughts on the whole issue of state and church separation:

I believe it is a false dichotomy when we believe we can separate church and state, religion and education and that we can effectively separate the two entities. They are intimately related to the point that we cannot talk intelligently of one without some understanding of the other. To believe we can teach our children to be intelligent, morally responsible people without an ethos out of which we teach will lead to the collapse of our culture as we know it. We need to know who we are, why we are who we are and how we came to be who we are. How does one address these issues apart from SOME understanding of religion?

Jewish. An e-mail interview as well as follow-up correspondence with Jewish rabbi Joseph Mendelsohn of Knoxville, Tennessee, provided insight from a non-Christian’s point of view on Christmas in public schools. He first asserted that “children from other (Non-Christian) religions are subjected to an overriding amount of religious indoctrine that does not agree with their families’ religious values.”

Dr. Mendelsohn provided these thoughts on whether or not religious study should be incorporated into a public school curriculum:

Yes, if it is offered as a part of an ethics or philosophy course as an approach to the subject matter or if it’s a historical activity [that] is pertinent to a history course. Information [on religion] should be presented as objectively as possible. In reaction to whether or not a public school employee should be disciplined for overtly breaking state and church separation issues, Rabbi Mendelsohn emphatically stated, “Yes.” Dr. Mendelsohn further stressed that elementary school principals should deal impartially with diverse populations and should not “allow proselytizing. Students need to feel safe—when another religion has official recognition—it endangers that safety.”

A question on a model diversity program in a public school generated a limited comment, for Dr. Mendelsohn was not aware of any model programs, at least “not at this time.” He did say, “Most programs that have been successful are due directly to the individual(s) in charge. When this leader holds to a particular value, it is reflected in an organization’s structure/behavior.”

Rabbi Mendelsohn’s non-Christian viewpoint on how Christmas should be handled in public schools reveals how children might feel who are not of the dominant religion. He was very straightforward in emphasizing that public educators must not proselytize religion through religious holidays. Elementary school leaders who want to know and appreciate the non-Christian viewpoint should be attentive to the rabbi’s responses.

Roman Catholic. A Catholic Eucharist minister who declined to be identified instructs middle school children provided her thoughts on the inclusion of Christmas in public elementary schools. She offered, “Because it is a celebration—it should be presented as one religious holiday. I believe Christmas should be acknowledged due to its historical significance. This presentation works well with social studies lessons.” When asked whether or not a public school system should enact a policy that curbed schools even mentioning religious holidays, she commented, “No, No, all religions that are represented in the community should be addressed equally.”

This educational instructor’s professional teaching experience has been in private schools. However, she did not advocate that public schools include religion in the curriculum. She stated, “I feel this should be left up to the parents and churches. Public

school educators are not trained to handle diverse religions. I believe more misunderstandings about diverse religions will occur.”

In answering a question on dealing with public school employees who overtly break state and church barriers, she offered, “Yes, I think action should be taken against an employee who refuses to follow legalities.”

When asked about her knowledge of a model program in public schools concerning diversity, she reiterated:

You need to understand that my teaching experience has been solely with a private school. Courses on religion (all religions) should be electives and offered after school hours. Again, I feel due to the complexity of religion—state and church issues should kept separate. One does not want to mislead children by not being able to provide the depth necessary to really understand the particular religion being studied.

This interviewee, who represented at least one Catholic’s viewpoint on Christmas and public schools, took a more restrictive view of how a religious holiday should be handled. She had a definite belief that religious study is a family matter, not to be included in the public school curriculum. Perhaps she was expressing both the territorial argument of private religious schools as well as her own basic beliefs. Her emphasis on the complexity of issues and her uncertainty about teachers’ abilities to handle religious beliefs successfully may indicate what kinds of training leaders need to consider when designing any sessions or workshops on diversity.

1st Amendment Center Senior Scholar

A telephone interview with Dr. Charles Haynes (Appendix G) provided information about religious holidays from an individual who has a national perspective on what is happening with state and church training issues:

Well, unfortunately there is not much else going on [around the country] to help [educators] except us [1st Amendment Center]. I do think it was very helpful that the Department of Education—a couple of years ago—established guidelines for all the schools. There is, for example, an occasional workshop and some...attorneys who will offer some topics [1st Amendment issues]. I'm not suggesting that none of that goes on [workshops on state/church issues]. However, if we are talking about systematic help across the country besides our own [1st Amendment Center]—not much.

Dr. Haynes felt there were several school systems that could serve as excellent models for dealing with diversity:

In *Finding Common Ground* you will find a number of model policies. For example, the Ramona School System in Southern California and the Wicomico County Schools in Salisbury, Maryland. We have listed other model policies in [our] new volume of *Finding Common Ground* that will be out very soon.

He emphasized that each of these districts had been through a long process of research and training with their staffs to deal with diversity issues.

Other than the national work of the 1st Amendment Center and perhaps a few regional efforts Dr. Haynes asserted:

I do not see any real effort being made to be more supportive to 1st Amendment protections. Religious holidays should be treated as opportunities to learn about different cultural traditions. An educated 1st Amendment populace should be more effective in dealing with religious holidays.

Dr. Haynes further clarifies the need for training:

Elementary school leaders should work with parents and community leaders to implement a religious liberty policy. Educational staffs must be trained to address issues concerning religious liberty.

Dr. Haynes also noted Christmas in the classroom can either hurt or help a school's mission:

I think it depends on what we mean by Christmas activities. If we are talking about promoting a religious holiday, then I think that hurts. It hurts religion because inevitably when the schools promote a particular religion they undermine

among other things those that are not of that faith. Sometimes they even undermine Christian groups who do not like the way their religion is being promoted...who feel it's bad for their faith to have it co-opted by public schools. So it can be damaging to the mission of the school if it does things that promote religion—not to mention the fact that the core mission of the school is civic: helping people to become good citizens.

What kind of message is it if we, on the one hand, try to teach kids to understand and to uphold our Constitution; then, on the other the hand, we break the Constitution—we violate the Constitution—we break the law? So I think that it's deeply fortunate that schools have the responsibility....first and foremost to model 1st Amendment principles. Having said that I think that...there is a better way Christmas [should] be treated in public schools—the choice is between keeping all the discussion of Christmas out...or promoting a Christian holiday.

There are many ways in which Christmas can be in public schools—kids can learn about what Christians actually believe about Christmas. They can learn about why the Puritans opposed Christmas. They can learn why different groups celebrate Christmas in different ways. All of that's part of what it means to be educated.

And as far as parties and so forth, that's a sensitivity question, and I think if people in the schools say, well, we can't have the religious part of Christmas—we're just going to have Santa Claus and trees, wreaths and at that point you know that may be legal...to promote the shopping mall Christmas, but that may not be the right or sensitive thing to do. But I really think at the heart of it what they [schools] can do under the 1st Amendment to address Christmas [is to be] educational and respectful. [Then] all sides of the issue can support that [approach to Christmas].

The information provided by Dr. Haynes indicates the Christmas dilemma indeed requires a careful balancing by elementary school leaders. His perspective provides a clear challenge to leaders to recognize the limited resources that have been available for help as well as the difficulty of finding a solution that does not compromise shared community values.

Northeast Elementary School: Additional Information

Despite an initial agreement on the part of NE Elementary School to participate, the researcher's being allowed to visit was eventually rejected by the administration. Therefore, an eyewitness account by the researcher was impossible. In lieu of an on-site visit, responses to the interviewer's questions were provided by phone, fax, the U.S. Mail Service, and e-mails. The interview questions for teachers and parents became questionnaires that were completed and either faxed or mailed back to the researcher. The data provided below serves only as additional information for the study. Although the decision was made to include the information, the data has not been used as one of the primary case study descriptions.

The Northeast Elementary School is located in a school system 35 miles southeast of a very large northeastern industrial city. The community has a population of approximately 28,000. The city that has the targeted elementary school serves as the county seat for a much larger area of over 200,000 people. The school facility is separated into primary and intermediate areas with a student population of approximately 580 students. The staff is made up of 38 professionals with over 60% having earned advanced degrees. The number of professionals with 15 years or more of experience is over 50%. The staff has three building level administrators. One of the NE system's key belief statements is "All students have value and are worthy of respect."

As described by staff and parents, NE decorations that appeared during the two weeks prior to their Winter Break generally had a secular theme, more indicative of a winter festival than a specific religious holiday. Bulletin boards throughout the school

had Santa Claus, reindeer, and snowmen. No Christmas trees were in the classrooms, but a miniature Christmas tree was located on the desk of one of the front office secretaries.

Administrators

The NE elementary school principal (NEP) and his two assistant principals (NEAP1 and NEAP2) said the school system followed a specific calendar for December:

NEP: A traditional school calendar that is based on Christian beliefs. Our Christmas break is now called a “Winter Recess” and the Easter break is now called “Spring Break.”

NEAP1: We live in a predominately Christian community in a very conservative area in the southwestern...[part of the state]. While holidays are called “Winter Holiday” and “Spring Holiday,” they coincide with Christian holidays. These holidays are scheduled by the school board. In our building there is much discussion of Christmas, Santa Claus, children sing Christmas carols, including religious ones, and participate in all traditional Christmas practices—tree trimming, gift giving, etc. The school board and the community appear to support these practices.

NEAP2: Yes, we follow a local school board policy [a copy was requested by the researcher, but it was not provided] that covers religious holidays.

The impact on the leadership of Christmas activities at NE seems to be fairly minimal—although it is interesting that the principal and one of the assistant principals do not use the same terminology when referring to the different vacation breaks. Perhaps the more secular language of the calendar still seems awkward to these educators as replacements for the more traditional—and religious—phrasing. Further, if NEAP1’s specific examples are typical, the school may, in fact, be undercutting the board’s policy against religious celebrations without being aware of the inconsistency.

NE’s principals all felt their approach to being sensitive to diverse groups within their school was adequate. They insisted additional training was unnecessary:

NEP: No, we rely on the good judgment of teachers and other staff members to respect the belief of all students.

NEAP1: Our school system does not provide training, and there does not appear to be need for training. I do not support this type of training because we have much greater needs in the area of curriculum and instruction.

NEAP2: No, I do not feel we need formal, professional training. Hopefully, teachers will use good judgment with this issue.

All three principals seem convinced that their teachers are already highly educated and sensitive to diversity. They believe their staff is using good judgment with church and state issues and will continue to do so.

Again, NE leaders were unanimous in believing their system has handled religious issues very positively and effectively for a number of years:

NEP: I feel we are positive and handle well religious issues. Religious issues are never a problem.

NEAP1: Our system's approach appears to be working and is satisfactory to parents and students.

NEAP2: This has always been handled respectfully by our school district.

NE principals all felt an individual who overtly promoted a particular religion should be disciplined immediately:

NEP: Yes, action would be taken—a verbal request to cease and review of policy. We tell staff members they can teach about religion—particularly social studies, but cannot teach a specific religion.

NEAP1: Proselytizing a particular religion is unconstitutional and should be handled immediately without question to the severity of consequences.

NEAP2: Yes, action would be taken—a verbal request to cease and review of policy. While teaching about religion is acceptable, promoting one religion is not permitted.

It seemed fairly evident if a staff member incorporated more study of religion or emphasized holidays beyond the board policies, some administrative action would be taken. All the principals seemed to have a clear idea on what would correct any problem they might encounter over religion.

The NE principals also agreed that their school staff approaches Christmas in an appropriate way:

NEP: A very generic approach: Santa Claus, reindeer, elves, North Pole, and share the joy of giving. We have no problem with this approach.

NEAP1: Because our population is really 100% Christian and we live in a conservative area, the celebration of Christmas has not caused complications in our school. The son of the temple's rabbi attends our school and the rabbi visits his class annually to share...traditions. I do not see complaints from any non-Christian groups in our area.

NEAP2: We have winter holidays, and as a result we have little or no problem at Christmas time.

Interestingly, one of the assistant principals made a point that the NE area was 100% Christian, but in the same sentence offered a story about the local rabbi's visit to his son's classroom to share Jewish traditions. This raises a question about whether or not diversity is overlooked within the school population and underscores how difficult it is for educators to recognize more than the majority's frame of reference.

The idea of promoting a more sensitive approach to non-Christian students received less than supportive reactions from the three leaders:

NEP: I'm not sure what a more sensitive approach means. I can only say our current system has worked well, no problems.

NEAP1: I would be willing to participate in any leadership program, but do not see a need at this point.

NEAP2: I believe the approach we have adopted is sensitive to all our families.

The NE administrators tended to feel very strongly that the NE way of handling religious issues should not be changed. Despite this insistence on the success of their current neutral policies, it is possible that the NE administration experiences cultural myopia as in other parts of the country and simply cannot see any insensitivity.

All three NE leaders felt their religious backgrounds did not hinder their approaches to state and church issues:

NEP: My religious background has no bearing on how I carry out board policy toward religious holidays in the schools. Our staff is well educated and sensitive to other religious beliefs and consciously protects the rights of all students. I actually feel Halloween is the most difficult time for “religious questions.” We have a small vocal minority (6 to 8 parents) that feel Halloween is a celebration of Satan. We have not allowed these people to stop children having fun.

NEAP1: I am a life-long practicing Christian whose personal faith supports acceptance of diversity in all areas including religion. I believe in personal expression of faith. That allows me to support separation of state and religion. I strongly believe that the public school is not a place for promoting any religious beliefs to the exclusion of others. As a leader, I accept the responsibility of supporting district policies regarding religious practices.

NEAP2: My religious background is not an issue when it comes to following policy. I do not believe it is an issue one way or the other.

The NE leaders were very clear on how they see state and church issues and felt confident their approach mirrors the consensus of their community.

Teachers

The three NE Elementary School teachers (NET1-NET3) answered the interviewer’s questions by mailing back their written replies. Generally, they did not feel Christmas created any problems in their teaching assignment:

NET1: The separation of church and state is a tough issue, but it doesn't cause any problems for me.

NET2: I really have never had any problem with Christmas.

NET3: Only for a few who do not want Santa or those who want equal representation. We do all sides...collect for the poor...exchange gifts and discuss Hanukkah.

The teachers reiterated the same emphasis of their leaders in that the NE school staff did not have any state and church controversies with Christmas or any other religious holiday.

The NE teachers stated that their majority religion was Christian, but they did not believe that particular faith received any extra attention:

NET1: I'm not sure we get extra attention—I'm a Christian, but I don't feel Christianity gets any extra attention.

NET2: I'm not aware of any extra attention. In some schools, parties and breaks have been renamed, example "Fall Festival" versus "Halloween" and "Spring Break" versus "Easter" and "Christmas Vacation" versus "Winter Vacation."

NET3: I don't feel we are teaching the true Christmas—the birth of Christ. We're teaching only secular—Santa, so it's not really here.

Again all the NE teachers, as did their leaders, stressed that since they used the secular approach, they did not have any problems with Christmas. Hence, like the leadership, the teaching staff would be very surprised by any controversy over the way they handle Christmas.

The question on whether or not they should be teaching about different religions brought contrasting responses:

NET1: I always make sure that when Christmas or religion is discussed, it is done in terms of being informative, not in a persuasive manner. This, I feel, keeps us away from crossing the state/church line.

NET2: As students mention a church event or related concept, we deal with it as any other “difference” or “similarity” among students. I do not initiate the topic on religions, but feel if a student brings up a religious topic, we can talk about it.

NET3: I think knowledge is important—I discuss Kwanzaa, Ramadan, Hanukkah and Christmas—as knowledge—not promoting religion.

The legal aspects of recognizing a holiday like Christmas in NE classrooms produced some different opinions:

NET1: I would respect anyone’s religious stance, but will not allow celebrating any religious holiday in my classroom.

NET2: Legal limitations are just using common sense with the issues. As with so many others, we walk a fine line with many issues.

NET3: I agree with separation of church and state, but secular—Santa is teaching American culture.

None of the NE teachers acknowledged that they felt unduly restricted in the legal handling Christmas. This may be an area that NE leaders will have to address someday even though at this time they are very confident that their entire staff deals appropriately with any state and church issue.

The question on any criticisms the NE teachers had encountered elicited replies similar to those that the researcher had received from both ET, FH, and MW teachers:

NET1: I don’t remember anyone actually criticizing me, but I feel some parents may think I don’t put up enough Christmas decorations.

NET2: No, I guess I’ve been pretty lucky as to not cause any controversy over any religious issue.

NET3: No, but I do promote the secular not religious approach.

The reactions of the NE teachers concerning parental questions on inclusion or exclusion of Christmas in their classroom resulted in the following:

NET1: I can't remember a time when parents even brought up the subject of how I handle Christmas in my classroom. I've taught only a few years, but up to now my parents have not questioned my approach.

NET2: I guess it may seem odd that in 25 years of teaching I haven't had any parents question the way I handle Christmas.

NET3: We do not touch the sensitive issues—only American customs.

The clear-cut board policy that NE follows seems thus far to provide a standard for both teachers and principals to avoid any major controversy over religious holidays like Christmas:

NET1: I believe our policy states that we do not celebrate any religious holidays. We do have a winter and spring break that coincides with major Christian holidays. I suppose some non-Christian groups could question the real purpose of having these vacation days line up with the Christian holidays.

NET2: In my classroom students and parents have always had options regarding participating in any holiday-related event.

NET3: Again, I don't feel we promote religious holidays; it is not allowed. This I think is good since religion is up to the family.

None of the NE teachers could recall an incident when anyone had asked them to display or distribute religious materials to students:

NET1: No, I really haven't been asked to display or distribute religious materials.

NET2: No, I guess our community understands that asking public school teachers to display or distribute religious material is not appropriate.

NET3: No, but I was asked by a Jewish student if he could talk about Hanukkah—he did—and I have made this an annual event.

None of the NE teachers remembered ever having a parent ask them about their personal religious beliefs:

NET1: No, this doesn't seem to be an issue.

NET2: No, I think parents in our area honor the fact that a person's religious belief is personal, and I'm glad.

NET3: No, I guess most of my parents would see that as inappropriate.

The approach the teachers are using at NE with Christmas seems to have kept leadership problems to a minimum.

Parents

Seven NE parents (NEPa1-NEPa7) provided information through written answers to the researcher's questions. Their completed answers were either mailed or faxed to the researcher. Generally, with the exception of NEPa1, the participating parents tended to feel that no dilemma existed in their school:

NEPa1: The dilemma Christmas creates is the exclusion of any reference to the "reason for the season." This had more parents upset than the vocal minority that wanted to take Christ out of Christmas. There is no balance.

NEPa2: It doesn't seem to create a problem.

NEPa3: No, I don't see a dilemma.

NEPa4: No, Christmas does not cause a problem.

NEPa5: Yes, some parents feel any "religious" holiday is inappropriate. There are both Jewish and agnostic families in the classroom.

NEPa6: No, we seem to deal with holidays in a very pluralistic manner.

NEPa7: The dilemma Christmas creates is the exclusion of any reference to Christmas. No, I don't see a problem.

All except one of the NE parents who responded felt Christmas was properly approached in their children's classrooms:

NEPa1: No, only "Holiday" or winter themes [are presented in my child's classroom].

NEPa2: Yes, along with the other holidays of the season.

NEPa3: Yes, my child's teacher is the wife of a Methodist minister so it is included, but not overly stressed.

NEPa4: No, Christmas does not cause a problem.

NEPa5: Yes, she provides the appropriate inclusion of Christmas.

NEPa6: It seem that the emphasis is placed upon the "giving of oneself" during the holiday season. I do not see a religious connotation, but the "spirit of the season" is quite obvious.

NEPa7: Yes, she does an excellent job.

The question on their knowledge of other parental concerns on how the school handles Christmas resulted in a variety of responses:

NEPa1: The majority of parents were upset that Christmas was excluded. No Christmas play or "religious" Christmas songs were allowed at the "Holiday Concert." Most parents found this offensive.

NEPa2: I don't know of any concerns. The school seems to do a good job of balancing all of the holidays in their teaching.

NEPa3: No, I believe most parents are very happy with the way the school handles Christmas.

NEPa4: Some religious groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses do not want their children to participate in Christmas activities.

NEPa5: Yes, as I have said earlier, most concerns are directed toward not enough inclusion of Christmas.

NEPa6: I have seen parents exclude their children from all holiday parties, for example, Halloween and Christmas. I feel our school is very pluralistic in its efforts.

NEPa7: I'm not aware of any concerns.

The full range of inclusion versus exclusion was represented in the parents' responses.

The fact that some parents (according to NEPa1) may have criticisms about how NE

teachers approach Christmas could indicate the more neutral activities may not be as well received as the leadership team perceives.

The NE parents had different interpretations of whether the school curriculum should include information about diverse religious beliefs:

NEPa1: It is not a school's job to teach a specific religion, but rather present all faiths with equal respect. It is the job of the Holy Spirit to bring someone to Christ. It's the parents' job to pass on their spiritual heritage.

NEPa2: The school curriculum should provide very basic information to help children understand why some of their friends do things differently. Nothing in-depth as the children are too young to process the information to form an opinion.

NEPa3: Yes, I believe that by teaching about diverse beliefs children are less likely to be or show prejudice as they have a better understanding of others in their class.

NEPa4: Yes, all children should have exposure to other beliefs.

NEPa5: No, I believe religion is something to be taught at home. I feel that holiday parties should be called just that. No emphases should be placed on Christmas, Hanukkah, or Kwanzaa.

NEPa6: No, families should be allowed to pursue the religious aspects of a holiday on their own. We could never include all beliefs. We should, however, teach children to respect others.

NEPa7: Yes, I feel this is a valid idea to consider.

Although only two out of seven parents did not support the inclusion of religious information in the curriculum, a few such voices of discontent might create some problems for the NE administration.

All of the NE parents felt teachers could go too far in recognizing or ignoring events of the Christmas season:

NEPa1: Yes, a balance would be beneficial. Christmas as well as other faith beliefs. All have customs, culture and history that can be taught without evangelizing.

NEPa2: Yes, if it becomes an attempt to persuade rather than to educate, then maybe it's recognized too far.

NEPa3: Yes, on both accounts. By ignoring the events the children are not allowed to experience others' traditions. But by overstating, by going too far, it distracts from the learning process.

NEPa4: Yes, by ignoring [Christmas] because of one child in the room with a different religion.

NEPa5: Yes, teachers can go too far or the reverse not far enough in presenting Christmas.

NEPa6: They can go too far, but I feel our school does a great job. We advertise community holiday events without prejudice and promote community service throughout the season without mentioning religion. We show the true meaning of the holidays.

NEPa7: I suppose so, but I am very pleased with how our school district recognizes Christmas and Hanukkah.

Based on these responses, the Christmas inclusion or exclusion concept followed at NE does not currently seem to offer any problem for the leadership.

A mixed reaction to the way NE approached decorating their hallways and rooms during December was expressed by the parents:

NEPa1: The school should be able to exercise the right of free speech. If a teacher wants "Merry Christmas" or the "Star of David" on the bulletin board, then they should be allowed to display it. The theme displayed obviously should relate to the season or current events. A teacher's personal beliefs should not be pursued in class.

NEPa2: If it is included in the curriculum, a bulletin board at that basic level may be appropriate. A "Merry Christmas" display is acceptable as Christmas has become as much a generic "American" holiday as a religious one. I am comfortable with any basic display, whether or not it includes the religious aspects.

NEPa3: No, there are many bulletin board designs that don't stress religion that can be used. Yes, I believe that including "Merry Christmas" is acceptable. At this age on a secular level, Christmas is all about "Santa." Children can relate to this better than religion.

NEPa4: Yes, it can also include other religious holiday messages for Kwanzaa and Hanukkah.

NEPa5: No, public schools should not display "Merry Christmas." They should stay with "Happy Holidays."

NEPa6: A public school must be careful in how the holidays are celebrated. We need to show we care without hurting anyone.

NEPa7: I do not have a problem with the school bulletin boards displaying religious topics. "Merry Christmas" is acceptable.

The impact on NE leadership of how parents view the issue of decorations and bulletin board themes has some potential for controversy. In general, the parents accept the way NE teachers decorate their rooms and boards. However, one cannot overlook the possibility that the meaning and purpose of decorations can be misunderstood and that most parents see no problem, perhaps because the boards reflect their own religious faith.

Finally, five of the seven NE parents had additional comments on their ideas about Christmas and public schools:

NEPa1: Many of the elementary schools in our area have gone too far in removing faith from schools. The decorations do not reflect culture and customs of the children attending school. In some of our local elementary schools children are not allowed to sing Christmas carols, perform Christian songs in the talent show, write about God in essays or decorate with a religious theme. However, at Halloween costumes with violent themes are allowed. Schools need to rethink, reprioritize, and revamp their approach to faith. Giving children the freedom to express their beliefs will give our kids a stronger foundations on which to build moral character.

NEPa2: I find that this is a difficult topic to sort through my thoughts on. As a manager, I am aware of the need to accept and work with cultural, including religious, diversity. I want my kids to understand and be accepting of others who

practice different beliefs. At the same time, in elementary school, I don't believe [children]...are capable of sorting through and forming opinions about different religious beliefs, so presenting material too early may interfere with what I want them to grasp onto.

NEPa3: As a former elementary teacher I found teaching about Christmas was a challenge, but we were able to include diverse beliefs as I taught in a private school. We taught Christmas, mostly secular. We included some religious topics like Kwanzaa as we had several African American children. We read stories and did activities that covered all the December holidays. The staff felt that by teaching all of these the children would be more tolerant of others' beliefs.

NEPa6: I think all should be comfortable to share in the joys and sometimes sorrows of their cultural celebrations. We need to realize that understanding these things in each other helps all of us to grow with patience, tolerance and love. If something is socially offensive, then we need to help our own children in the awareness and understanding that unfortunately these situations exist.

NEPa7: We teach our children in our home about religious beliefs. We encourage our children to talk about what they hear and learn outside our home so that we can explain to them why we do or do not agree with what they were taught as far as religion.

These additional thoughts suggest the complexity of the issues and the range of attitudes held by parents. Educational leaders may have a great deal of difficulty with a diverse population if some parents become more assertive in publicly airing some of the points raised in these interviews.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this case study was to determine how four elementary schools in different cultural and policy settings handled the religious holiday Christmas in their schools. The methodology of this study included the use of interviews, observations, pertinent documents, and artifacts. From these sources, the specific approaches and reactions were analyzed and used to help clarify the nature of the Christmas dilemma for elementary school leaders. The qualitative researcher must see the most logical and grounded approach for emerging theories. Therefore, a number of similarities and contrasts will be discussed based on the information provided by the research participants as well as from observational artifacts and descriptions of the types of Christmas decorations that were displayed at the school locations.

The research questions discussed in the first chapter served as a guide to direct the researcher in finding answers, meaning and recommendations. These questions targeted (1) how Christmas challenged elementary schools, (2) how these challenges impact those school activities with potential church and state issues, and (3) what steps elementary schools are taking to deal with religious issues like Christmas.

Findings

There are various themes that emerged from the interviews, discussions, observations, and written descriptions of school decorations. These themes included (1), the participants' mixture of emotional reactions (2), the schools' varied ways of handling

Christmas (3) the variance in system-wide policy approaches, and (4) the volatile role of religion in public schools. The targeted groups (administrators, teachers, parents, and religious leaders) provided the data sources from which the following four major findings were derived.

The Participants' Mixture of Emotional Reactions

One finding that quickly emerged during the interview process was the repetition of the following four general reactions to questions about how the participants handled Christmas:

- apprehension over the fear of a lawsuit that could be brought forth over the way a public elementary school handles Christmas. This is reflected in one interviewee's comment, "I think everyone is afraid of creating some legal problem over a religious issue." Others reflected this finding by saying they, too preferred not to provide their thoughts on the topic with comments such as "I'm really uncomfortable discussing Christmas in public schools with so many people lawsuit happy."
- restriction to secular interpretations of Christmas. For example, teachers' feelings about their school's approach ranged from acceptance to resentment. Some teachers who said they accept the way they are allowed to approach Christmas while at the same time conveyed tones of irritation with the legal restrictions, suggesting at least some degree of potential leadership problems for their school. One teacher illustrated this point by saying "I do it, but I don't like it."

- fear of criticism by colleagues, parents, or supervisors about how they personally handle Christmas or about voicing their opinion on how Christmas should be included or excluded in a public elementary school. This was reflected most clearly in the explanations of those who chose to withdraw from the study. Despite assurances of anonymity, a typical comment was “I don’t want anyone to know my opinion.”
- denial of any significant problem, most directly articulated by those in the administrative and teacher groups. The most frequent reaction by participants to the question on whether or not Christmas caused any problems in their schools was simply “no problem.” However, it was pointed out by some teachers that unless someone had lived and taught outside the Southeast, it was difficult for that educator to be aware of the amount of extra attention that the majority religion (Christianity) gets over non-Christian religions. The researcher found that none of the educators from the Southeast who had taught and lived only in the South were willing to say that the majority religion gets any extra attention in public schools. However, educators who lived or had lived outside of the Southeast were more likely to acknowledge that in some cases the majority religion does get extra attention.

The Schools’ Varied Ways of Handling Christmas

Another finding centers on the diverse range of evaluations and self perception by participants on how well their schools maintain the separation of church and state. The researcher found that administrators rated themselves as compliant with either their local

school board policy or the legal interpretations based on relevant judicial cases. However, it is worth noting that in recent years the courts have not been as consistent in their church and state separation judgments. In terms of supporting the concept of separation of state and church issues all leaders gave at least lip service to being supportive, meaning they interpreted their actions as being appropriate. Discussions with these leaders further confirmed they interpreted their actions to be well within board policies and/or the law. However, observations and conversations with other key players within each school community indicated that what some of the elementary leaders actually allowed in their buildings (such as clearly Christian decorations) could be interpreted as less compliant with the policies and laws than they perceived.

Teachers, like their leaders, also all felt they were in compliance with the rules of proper separation of church and state issues. However, a different evaluation could be reached based on observations and discussions with the teachers about how they incorporate Christmas into their classroom. Despite comments on keeping church and state issues separated, teachers' practices of the two case study schools in the Southeast could be placed more towards the inclusion of a celebratory approach to Christmas.

The most overt evidence of this variety and possible confusion over a schools' approach to religion was found in the amounts and types of decorations displayed in the hallways and classrooms. A number of Christmas decorations of both children's artwork and commercially-produced displays throughout the school buildings were observed by the researcher or described to the researcher by study participants. Whether or not bulletin boards were of a religious or secular nature could serve as visual signals of the

type of atmosphere in the school—one that may or may not have been offensive to non-Christian groups. The ET school, for instance, leaned heavily toward Christian displays (nativity scenes, angels, and cathedral stained glass windows), while FH and the MW schools kept displays focused on more generic, secular icons of the season (snowmen, snowflakes, Santa Claus, etc.). Without interviewing the children most directly affected by these displays, the researcher could not assess to what degree, if any, children were troubled by what was or was not included in such displays. Yet to an adult observer, several displays in the ET school clearly blurred the distinction of church/state separation.

When ET principals were asked about the appropriateness of the displays in their buildings or classrooms, they resisted answering the question or chose to address the legality of the displays, degree of sensitivity to issues of diversity, purposes of the displays, and the extent to which they were impacting students and their parents. Administrators' decisions on whether or not teachers were given a free rein in decorating their rooms for Christmas seemed to be based on trusting that their teachers would remain within legal and sensitive limits.

The Variance in System-Wide Policy Approaches

An additional and perhaps more critical finding is the inconsistency of policies to guide schools in their handling of Christmas or other religious issues. A degree of confusion often surfaced when specific questions about policy were raised by the researcher. Some participants were not sure if a local policy actually existed, or they just assumed judicial rulings were enough to use as guidelines. Of the four fully participating

schools in the study only one had policy that dealt with state and church issues while the three other schools acknowledged they depended on court case decisions as their guide. Some teachers and even the Director of the MW Schools thought they had a local board policy, but in reviewing the policy, the researcher discovered nothing had been enacted.

However, even though the ET system had a policy on religion, there were still staff members who were unsure of what they could or could not do about religion. The MW school system had a place designated in their local policy for the inclusion of such a policy, but had not enacted one. They did, however, have a brief reference that established the practice that parties in celebration of any event should be held only in the last hour of the school day. This practice allowed parents the option of removing their children from such events.

This vagueness on the part of school board documents may be intentional as a method to avoid confrontations over specific religious issues. As one teacher related, “Concerning our local policy on religion—I think it’s working or they [the school board] would have changed it. You’re bound to get criticism at any time about anything.” The researcher found that generally the lack of a concrete policy on religion generates an atmosphere of uncertainty for the classroom teacher.

The Volatile Role of Religion in Public Schools

Perhaps most significant to school leaders, the last major finding involved a recognition of the volatility of the Christmas issue that could erupt (e.g., Christmas issues at FH in December of 1999) from either extreme of attitudes about the role of religion in the schools. Without much warning elementary leaders could be dealing with groups who

advocate high inclusion of Christmas or with those groups who seek exclusion of Christmas in public schools. Many of the participants from all interview groups valued the importance of children learning about religions. However, a uniform, generally agreed upon method of providing the proper background on the importance of religions did not surface in the study.

All four findings may transfer to other elementary school settings. However, it has been my goal to follow the suggestion of noted researchers Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba who say it is “*not* the naturalist’s task to provide an *index* of transferability; it *is* his or her responsibility to provide the *data base* that makes transferability judgments possible on the part of the potential appliers” (1985, p. 316).

Patterns Across Sites

Individual reactions to the interview questions can be placed along a continuum from extremes of inclusion and exclusion of Christmas in their public school. For example, the ET school’s decorations placed their inclusion of Christmas directionally toward high inclusion of Christmas with a religious emphasis. The FH decorations were more in the middle of a continuum of Christmas inclusion. This means their decorations were in most cases secular with only one that had multiple religious holidays depicted (Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa). The MW decorations as described by those interviewed would be more secular and be placed closer to the exclusion extreme.

Administrators

Neither the ET principal nor his assistant principal had ever been questioned by parents about the manner in which the school staff had included Christmas during the

month of December. Therefore, the principals did not interpret any of the Christmas actions by ET teachers and staff as creating any leadership problem with state and church issues.

Compliance with board policies on religion was a recurring emphasis given by the principals at ET who believed their procedure in dealing with all aspects of different religions was appropriate. Therefore, they believed any problems that might develop due to a religious holiday should be minimal. However, it might seem that the ET principals who feel a greater sensitivity toward non-Christian students is not necessary may have a potential problem. A major state and church issue could arise if questions are ever posed by even just one of their families who do not recognize the Christmas holiday.

The FH principal and assistant principal both dealt with the Christmas dilemma in 1999 at Foothills Elementary School. Except for that one season neither principal had being questioned about how Christmas should be handled. FH and MW principals, unlike ET and NE leaders, felt elementary school teachers could benefit from in-service training on dealing with religion. This training may prevent teachers from making mistakes with state and church issues in an increasingly diverse population.

Whether or not the FH's school system is using an effective approach to religious issues can be questioned since there is no clear policy established on how to deal with religion or religious holidays in the schools. Leaving it up to each schools' staff to establish procedures on religious issues opens too many possibilities for conflict within a school or school system. The existing site-based management system tends to allow a fragmented approach towards Christmas inclusion or exclusion. The community, as

mentioned earlier by the former Chairman Oliver Thomas of the Maryville School Board of Education, would benefit by joining together and developing a balanced approach to dealing with religion policy.

ET and NE leaders also relied heavily on trusting their staffs to follow board policy in dealing with religious holidays. They seemed to have no fear of anyone on their staff having any problems with Christmas or any other holiday. They did not feel any diversity sensitivity training was necessary. Christmas or any other state and church issues seemed to be minor matters that would not be of any special concern to their teachers. If anyone did have a problem, this could be addressed by the board policy. The principal would first use the policy as a reminder of how diversity should be handled and, if necessary, again the policy would be used to discipline. Foothills' leaders and the MW leaders both felt the volatility of Christmas and other state and church issues warranted strong consideration for in-service training to be more sensitive and aware of religious issues.

Information was first examined from the point of view of the school leaders who see and feel firsthand the leadership pressure caused by religious holidays. This study suggests that elementary school leaders face external and internal pressures that run from subtle to extreme. Decisions by principals on the extent to which Christmas is to be included in their public elementary schools can range from no inclusion in which no part of the religious holiday is recognized to high inclusion where religious subject matter is allowed, including nativity scenes on display. The actual approach followed by most leaders can be located somewhere between the two extremes.

Some school leaders may also have difficulty separating personal religious belief systems as they respond to the external pressures created by interpretations from the courts, school boards, colleagues, parents and community religious leaders. The school leaders' personal beliefs may also create internal pressures that may or may not be acknowledged. ET leaders fall very close to the conservative position on the continuum with FH more in the middle. MW and NE leaders are directionally more towards the liberal extreme. None of the administrative groups felt that their religious backgrounds caused any problem for their leadership. Some even felt it helped in their day-to-day activities. Others did not see that it helped or hindered.

Outside the Bible Belt (Southeast) the inclusion of any religious idea with Christmas does not even seem to be an issue. Based on the data collected, this attitude seems to characterize the MW schools as well as being interpreted from the explanations provided in the NW additional information section.

Teachers

Teachers were in an exceptional position to present a critical point of view on the direct and indirect pressures related to Christmas that may positively or negatively impact their leaders. Teachers are not only reactors, but also major players in putting into reality various interpretations of how Christmas fits into their curriculum and teaching assignments. The actions by teachers directly impact the administrators' role as leaders. All teachers in the study would probably place themselves in the middle of the continuum of how Christmas is recognized at their school. They basically interpret their approaches as being balanced and acceptable. It is worth noting, however, that the FH teachers were

being interviewed by their principal. What influence, if any, that had on their responses is difficult to assess.

Based on the data, however, ET verbalizations and decorations seem to place the ET teachers more toward the more traditional approach that included religion. FH teachers verbalize and decorate more in the middle of the continuum while MW teachers verbalize and decorate more with a secular emphasis. Again, one can interpret from the NE descriptions of their school during December that their general approach is to omit any acknowledgment of the religious aspects of the holiday.

The ET teachers generally believed that they were following the proper methods in dealing with Christmas. The general feeling received from these interviews was that the teachers at ET attempted to follow their board policy, but some did so reluctantly. In general, they tended to feel the board policy was a little too restrictive. FH leaders did indicate a need for a board policy on religion while their teachers seemed initially a little confused about whether or not a policy already existed. The interviewed MW staff seemed to be very content with the school system's approach to religious holidays. This held true for the NE staff as well.

All teachers interviewed or who filled out the NE questionnaire agreed that Christmas in their classroom was not a problem. However, the reasons for it not being a problem were different according to regions: the Southeast versus outside the Southeast. The teachers in the southeastern schools tended to answer based on the actual amount of Christmas activities that go on in their classroom and school. The MW and NE teachers' answers are best described by one of the MW teachers who said "everybody's okay with

what we do because we don't do a lot." Therefore, it seems that the teachers outside the Bible Belt tend to operate a little more clearly in separating church and state issues like Christmas in their classrooms.

Parents

Parents often discover firsthand how their children are exposed to Christmas at school. The reaction of the parents, regardless of their own religious backgrounds, can lead to either acceptance or concern over their school's techniques in dealing with Christmas. The comments by parents both out in the community and directly to the school leaders create an immediate positive or negative pressure on the administrators. The ET parents tended to mirror the leaders and teachers of their school who support a more religious approach to Christmas inclusion. On the other hand, the FH and MW parents seemed to be more scattered between the two extremes of exclusion/inclusion of religion: a few wanted more focus on Christmas and some wanted less focus a greater sensitivity towards culturally different groups. FH parents did not line up neatly on either extreme of the inclusion to exclusion continuum. According to the data collected, FH and MW included parents whose attitudes ranged from inclusion to exclusion as appropriate policy for school Christmas activities. However, other than ET parents, most parents seemed more in the middle of the two extremes.

Religious Leaders

The fourth group of data contributors included community religious leaders who may influence how Christmas should be handled in public elementary schools. The particular religion they practice may or may not dictate how they advocate religious

holidays should be addressed in public elementary schools. The religious leaders interviewed in the ET and FH area revealed extreme differences on how Christmas should be included in public elementary schools. Two of the religious leaders believe Christmas has no part in public elementary schools. Another minister promotes a more moderate approach with Christmas presented with both its religious historical significance as well as inclusion of secular traditions. Interestingly, the one participating religious leader who resides outside the Southeast supports a high religious inclusion of Christmas in public schools. This placed his views apart from the other interviewed religious leaders.

School Rejections and Author's Reflections

The journey that I have taken from the Christmas Dilemma at Foothills Elementary School in December of 1999 to the present has provided educational growth. The data that I have been able to collect have raised new concerns and even some frustrations. My topic at first seemed to create excitement in many people who were openly willing to discuss the issues with me, but later many refused for a variety of reasons to participate in the study. The main reason I was given by some of the potential interviewees was over their fear of being criticized for their personal opinions from different segments within the community.

The fear or apprehension that seemed to be raised could be seen on all levels of the study's population targets. These fear levels included a school system, a school, and some individuals who were either administrators, teachers or parents. The best example of a major refusal occurred when administrators in the central office of a Midwestern

school backed away from participating in a study focusing on religious diversity. One reason given by the system's head of research was the concern over renewed problems similar to those that the school had encountered two years earlier over Halloween. The rejection was also based on the scare over the terrorists' attack and its religious overtones in September of 2001, for the rejection came on September 15th, four days after the attack. It seems the terrorists' attacks indeed created psychological damage in educational institutions. Hopefully, this kind of fear or apprehension will not grow. The input of this particular Midwestern school would have been very helpful to the study given their policy that religious holidays are not to be even mentioned. Christmas is not acknowledged even at the commercial level with Santa Claus.

However, I have found in this data collection process that in reality many hurdles still need to be overcome to encourage individuals to freely discuss their personal views on a sensitive subject like Christmas in public elementary schools. The concern that someone might disagree with one's point of view apparently prevented many people from providing their opinions on this controversial topic. I found some fear even within my educational colleagues and school parents. I had to replace one parent who backed out of the Foothills group who was reluctant to have her opinions known. I also had two parents back out of the study of the ET group for what the principal indicated were similar reasons. I was, however, able to replace all of these withdrawals in the pursuit of getting data input. This replacement did not happen with the number of teachers sought for the study at the NE school. The initial five teachers who were willing to provide their opinions dwindled to only three by the end of the data collecting process. The number of

refusals to participate from even inside my own school and community again highlighted the powerful emotion that Christmas and public schools seems to evoke.

Like so many of the individuals that I contacted during the data collecting phase, I too was somewhat unaware of the explosive nature of Christmas and public elementary schools. Many of the interviewees initially saw no problem or controversy for them in discussing the ways a school might or might not approach Christmas. Yet, even with the assurance of confidentiality, the participants' fear of unknown critics tended to play a powerful role in their willingness to answer questions openly or even in some cases be willing to offer more than very brief replies.

The fear or apprehension of the researcher's presence also caused a problem in one of the targeted schools. Traveling to the NE site in December of 2001 was at first discouraged due to the fear of more terrorists' activities in that part of the nation. The on-site visit was eventually rejected, yet the principal insisted that the researcher would still receive data by phone, e-mail, faxes and the postal service. Therefore, the second major denial came as a partial rejection. The principal did not elaborate on his reasons and was willing to provide as much help as possible by answering the researcher's questions in the formats listed above. The data that was provided offered a great deal of information, but must be taken as secondary in lieu of not being collected in a face-to-face interview. This also limited the researcher's eyewitness account of the school's environment. Knowledge of decorations and displays during the Christmas season was based on descriptions by the staff and parents of the NE school. The thickness of description was limited by this secondary method of data collection. The answers to the researcher's question were

specific, but did not allow for any follow-up or clarifications. The data provided by the NE school was, therefore, included as additional information and not as one of the case descriptions.

Commendable Practices

Despite these obstacles and expression of fears, the leaders of the case study schools are dealing with state and church issues in a number of excellent ways. For example, the school leaders attempt to base their decisions on sound policies, promote a high level of staff trust, and be tolerant of diverse groups. The ET leaders have been very careful to support Christmas according to their understanding of their school board policy. They also are very supportive of their staff in the way they approach Christmas—an approach that is generally backed by the school's parents. The leadership at FH has at least a willingness to be supportive of getting a school board policy on dealing with religious issues adopted with the community equally represented. This openness to bringing about a better situation in Maryville can be seen as a first step toward becoming more sensitive to cultural diversity. MW leaders confidently face diversity with solid decision-making processes in place to deal with any controversies. They were very willing to include more training for themselves and their staffs to be better prepared to deal with diverse religious issues.

Recommendations for Practice

My advice to elementary school principals who face the same complex issues in dealing with Christmas and their schools can be categorized on three levels: local, state, and national. On the local and state level an administrator needs to be alert to all the

directed towards educational leaders. He feels pressures on educational leaders will increase as each community's population becomes more culturally diverse. He thinks elementary school leaders will be able to cope with the new pressures if they stay open-minded and are willing to be more sensitive to religious differences. Therefore, educational administrators must be knowledgeable (through some type of professional staff development) on religious issues and know how diverse groups might impact the school operation. Sensitivity is a key that everyone representing public schools should use as a norm, not as an exception.

Both Haynes and Thomas have worked together as well as separately in helping educators and other community leaders deal with such issues as Christmas and public schools. One of the major missions of the 1st Amendment Center is to help educators become more aware of how religion should be addressed in public schools. Thomas and Haynes see the need for community leaders, including elementary school administrators, to take a stand on promoting sensitivity towards all people as well as developing a more moderate approach to Christmas. The major difference in their Christmas focus is their advocacy of a balanced approach which includes religious study about the holiday and the avoidance of any semblance of celebrating this holiday. Both indicated the need to have school board policies to serve as positive guidelines to deal with any religious holiday (Appendix I). Dr. Haynes added a strong plea to have all staff members in elementary schools educated on the topics of providing religious freedom for every group. For many public elementary school principals and teachers this will mean rethinking how they present Christmas to their students and parents. Training like the

possible issues that can become explosive. An awareness of one's own point of view about Christmas and that of his or her school and of the diversity of the community are critical. Understanding the basis for one's own opinion may have to be reached by careful analysis through discussion with colleagues and experts on state and church issues. This discussion must cover all avenues of the topic including legal implications that may be based on local board policies, state regulations and court rulings.

It is also my recommendation that work sessions should be offered to educational staffs to provide information on religion in public schools from both a local and national perspective. For example, the work sessions on church and state issues provided by Oliver Thomas and Dr. Charles Haynes through the 1st Amendment Center are examples of the type of needed staff training.

The need for church and state issues training was emphasized because when faced with the dilemma at Foothills Thomas's legal and religious background incorporated with his school board chairmanship provided credentials to help develop appropriate leadership advice. Even though Thomas too became a target of criticism from the Concerned Christian group he earned praise from many community political and religious leaders. His calm, measured reactions to criticism served as a model for public educators who also face critics.

The work of Dr. Charles Haynes through the 1st Amendment Center is another source of training for public educational staffs to consider. Hayne's background enables him to offer an expertise on state and church issues. The knowledge that an individual like Haynes has to share provides insight on the different types of pressures that can be

type both Thomas and Haynes advocate should enable an entire school staff to be equipped to face religious controversies more successfully.

Recommendations for Further Study

This case study described public elementary schools which suggest a transferability of the findings. These findings were based on the similarities of the reactions of the different targeted groups as they view Christmas and their public elementary school. One of the major limitations of the study stems from the dependency on individuals who in many cases might be afraid to have anyone to know their true feelings about Christmas and their school. It is the researcher's hypothesis that based on the denials and rejections of interviewees and potential interviewees that these fears seem to be generated by a belief that just by talking about the issues some negative result could happen concerning Christmas at their school. Therefore, this fear prevented the researcher in some cases from reaching the desired depth in the pursuit of data.

A number of other possible studies became apparent as interviews and data were collected. The open-ended interview data provided a variety of possible directions that a researcher might take. For example, the two Protestant religious leaders had very different slants on how public schools should handle Christmas. The Catholic and Jewish religious leaders seemed to be closer in their way of thinking about state and church issues than were the two Protestants leaders. A researcher might survey in more detail the variety of attitudes on church and state issues taken by religious leaders, including the differences that may exist between those faiths with a centralized religious authority and hierarchy and those that are more self-regulating.

Another possible research study could be to examine pressures placed on public schools surrounding the religious holiday Easter in a mostly Christian community. As illustrated by a Jewish parent's letter to a newspaper (Appendix J), parental concerns may not always be aggressively presented to the school, but may be deeply felt nevertheless. The school community may involve numerous different religious groups or just one religious classification like Protestant. The Protestant faith itself involves a variety of denominations (Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutheran, etc.). Each of these subgroups can have different emphases on state and church issues. Therefore, even if the Protestant religious groups dominate a community's religious classification, the subgroups may still create major state and church conflicts with local public schools. Such a study could be approached in any community regardless of the majority religion by examining the impact on the public school by the religion's subgroups.

Another study on state and church issues can involve a comparison of public and private religious schools as they relate to religious holidays. Is there a large disparity existing between private and public practices? One would assume that the private religious schools would include the maximum level of religious holiday recognition within their curriculum. Therefore, an interesting comparison would be to look at the reality of the private religious school's approach as it compares with a public school approach.

A fourth possible study might look at state and church issues as they are handled by local and national media. Do the media support state and church separation? If a state and church controversy occurs within a school community, do the newspapers, radio and

television stations remain neutral, take sides, or serve as catalysts to keep the controversy alive? Are the media primarily seeking stories regardless of fairness or based on a full awareness of the real purpose behind state and church constitutional barriers?

Finally, another possible research study could examine religious holidays from students' point of view. Working with children is considered the hardest type of research to be able to undertake, especially when one considers ethical limitations on children as research participants. However, the results in discovering how children view church and state issues would provide an important addition to the field.

This study has been a first step in analyzing Christmas in the public elementary schools and provides multiple perspectives suggesting the diversity of views held by those involved with public education. Ultimately, many educators must recognize the complexity of the issue as well as the difficulty of reaching a consensus that will satisfy everyone's point of view. Given the emotional and legal ramifications of this issue, the overall impact of this religious holiday on elementary school leaders should continue to be researched.

Conclusion

An assessment of the data collected in interviews and observations as well as a review of the literature can lead to several extended analyses. First, certain shared values seem to emerge even among those who hold differing points of view. None of the participants denigrated the value of public school education, and all seemed concerned about the welfare of the children in the various schools. Those who appear to blur the distinction of state/church separation do so without necessarily seeing that what they are

doing may be harmful. In fact, some seem unable to understand that non-Christian children might be confused or feel excluded by either subtle or overt Christian Christmas traditions.

Given the difficulty for some in recognizing that there may be a current or future problem with policies on handling religious issues, certain unintended consequences may emerge. For example, schools may become divided by emotional, overt reactions to whatever policy is followed in connection with Christmas. Others may be silently discontented, fostering internal unrest within a school. Another consequence may be the continuation of the taboo on discussion of religious matters. One of the hallmarks of those who seemed to deny the reality of any problem was their reluctance to engage in an extended conversation or dialogue about the issue of Christmas. This voluntary silencing of discussion may perpetuate the inability to recognize the nature of the dilemma.

Students too may feel the impact of the unresolved Christmas dilemma. At one extreme, they may be inappropriately influenced by well-meaning faculty and staff who nevertheless end up proselytizing rather than keeping an objective stance on religion. Students may also be limited in their contact with or information received about other cultures and religions, a part of education that is increasingly necessary in a multi-cultural nation. Over-reactions to fear of legal missteps or community censure may also create a tense atmosphere in schools that undermine a positive environment for learning.

An additional conclusion can be drawn concerning the self-awareness administrators should develop. To be effective in a nation that honors the separation of church and state, a school leader should cultivate an understanding of the religious and

non-religious persuasions of the school population and the community. This knowledge may prevent a school leader from being blind-sided when situations such as Christmas erupt into controversy. Further, whatever religious beliefs the leader may or may not have must be carefully monitored in order to keep personal inclinations from tainting policies for the whole of the school population.

Finally, it seems clear that Americans have yet to fully systematize clear definitions of what the separation of church and state means when applied to concrete matters of policy. Such a lack of resolution may lead to conflicts that negatively impact the mission of public education. In another sense, such conflicts may be beneficial, for the lack of clear resolution encourages critical thinking and counters inclinations to remain silent or unaware of any potential dilemma. The various interpretations of the intent of the framers of the Constitution challenges each generation to continue the discussion on national goals and the nature of the United States.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A
Informed Consent Form

I, _____, give permission to David R. Berry, to use the information I have provided to him in an interview for his dissertation. I have checked the following (any/all):

1. I expect to be cited if quoted directly (a sentence or more)_____
2. I prefer to remain anonymous (even if I am quoted directly)_____
3. I expect to be allowed to read any portion of the text where I am quoted and credited_____
4. I give David permission to use two or three word phrases from his interview with me without expecting to be cited directly_____
5. I give David permission to include me in a generic collection of interviewees' thoughts, without specific credit, under phrases such as "several interviewed suggested", or "some of the participants agreed", etc._____

Printed Name

Date

I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

Signature:

I, David R. Berry, promise to honor your words and meaning in this dissertation project. I promise to use appropriate citation form within the Appendix, unless you elect to remain anonymous. I promise to maintain a detailed data bank with a clear audit trail, so everyone's ideas are included in the completed work.

Appendix B

Administrator Interview Questions

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION: Gender: Male ☐ Female ☐

Religious Preference: Protestant ☐ Catholic ☐ Jewish ☐ Islamic ☐

Buddhist ☐ Hindu ☐ Other ☐ None ☐

Years of Experience as a Educational Leader: _____

1. Briefly describe how your school or school system deals with religious holidays. Is this based on a local school board policy?
2. Does your school system provide in-service training sessions for dealing with religious issues? Do you feel this is needed? If so, how should this be presented?
3. Do you feel the approach your system takes with religious issues is effective?
4. Do you feel anyone on your staff promotes a particular religion to his/her students? Should you take any action towards a staff member who (during the school day) overtly proselytizes a particular religion? If any action is to be taken, what action should be taken?
5. Do you feel the way Christmas is addressed at your school has any major implications for you as a school leader? If you feel problems could be created, what kind of problems do you feel might occur?
6. Do you feel you would have a major leadership problem for yourself if you attempted to promote a more sensitive approach to all religious holidays?
7. Do you feel your own religious background hinders or helps you deal with church and state issues? If you feel it hinders your leadership—how does it hinder? If you feel it does not hinder your leadership—how does it help?

Appendix C

Teacher Interview Questions

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION: Gender: Male ☐ Female ☐

Religious Preference: Protestant ☐ Catholic ☐ Jewish ☐ Islamic ☐

Buddhist ☐ Hindu ☐ Other ☐ None ☐

Years of Experience as a Teacher: _____

- 1) Does Christmas create any problems for your teaching assignment? If so, what type of problems?
- 2) Do you feel the majority religion of your area gets extra attention in your school?
- 3) Do you attempt to include religions in your teaching efforts?
- 4) Do you feel legally limited to include religious holidays in your classroom lessons?
- 5) Have you ever been aware of any criticisms about the way you approach Christmas?
- 6) Are you ever questioned by your parents for your inclusion (or lack of inclusion) of Christmas in your classroom?
- 7) Do you feel local policy on religion would be helpful? Does your system have any type of policy on the inclusion or exclusion of religious holidays?
- 8) Have you been approached by religious groups to display or distribute religious materials in your classroom?
- 9) Have you ever had parents of your students ask about your religious beliefs?

Appendix D
Parent Interview Questions

1. Does Christmas create any type of dilemma at your child's elementary school? If you feel a problem is created, what type of problem is created?
2. Does your child's teacher provide for the inclusion of Christmas in his/her classroom?
3. Are you aware of any parental concerns about Christmas at your child's school? Are these concerns focused on inclusion or exclusion?
4. Should a school curriculum include religious information about diverse beliefs?
5. Can a school staff go too far in recognizing (or ignoring) the events of the Christmas season?
6. Should school bulletin boards be used to display religious topics? Is a display that includes "Merry Christmas" acceptable? If so, in what way should it be presented?

Appendix E
Religious Leader Questions

1. Should Christmas be acknowledged in public schools? If not, why not? If so, in what ways?
2. Should public schools include religion in their curricula? If so, in what format?
3. Should any action be taken by local school boards towards school leaders who overtly break state and church barriers?
4. As a religious leader have you had any experience with public schools that have been able to provide a successful approach to a diverse population? If so, how was it done? If not, do you have a theory on how public schools with diverse populations could successfully include religious studies?
5. Should a school system have a policy that does not allow any mentioning of religious holidays? Are you aware of any public schools that follow this type of policy?

Appendix F

Interview Questions for Oliver Thomas

1. Do you feel Maryville City Schools (MCS) should adopt a local policy on the appropriate role of religion in the curriculum? If so, do you feel such a policy should be specific on how religious holidays should be handled in elementary schools?
2. Do you feel the MCS has suffered any real setbacks due to the right-wing Concerned Christian attack in 1999?
3. Do you feel Christmas activities in public elementary schools help or hurt our nation's schools?
4. Do you see any new national or regional movements by public school systems to be more supportive of 1st Amendment protections? If so, does this have any positive or negative implications for religious holiday issues?
5. What advice do you have for elementary school leaders to become more effective in handling their school's presentation of religious holidays?

Appendix G

Interview Questions for Dr. Charles Haynes

1. Do you feel Christmas activities in public elementary schools help or hurt our nation's schools? In what way does Christmas help or hurt our public schools?
2. Are you aware of any current effort in public school leadership to be more sensitive to religious differences? If not, should there be a national effort to address this issue?
3. Have you observed any public schools in the United States that you feel serve as good models for dealing with diversity? If so, what areas of the country? How do they go about being more sensitive to their diverse populations?
4. Do you see any new national or regional movements towards being more supportive of 1st Amendment protections? Does this have any implications for the holiday issues in public schools?
5. What advice do you have for elementary school leaders to become more effective in handling their school's presentation of religious holidays?

Appendix H
ET School Board Policies

Controversial Issues

The discussion of issues in the classroom which are politically, philosophically or socially controversial shall be relevant to the subject matter being taught, related to educational objectives, appropriate for the age and maturity of students, and shall not materially disrupt or threaten to disrupt the discipline of the school.

To ensure that controversial issues are presented and discussed fairly and objectively and with instruction as their goal, the following guidelines shall be observed:

All personnel will seek an atmosphere in which differences of opinion can be voiced without fear and hostility and with mutual respect for all viewpoints;

Teachers will encourage students to withhold judgment and to avoid making of conclusions until all relevant and significant facts have been assembled, critically examined, and checked for accuracy;

Teachers will seek to develop in students a sense of responsibility for their beliefs, opinions, attitudes and actions;

Teachers shall place major emphasis upon “why” and “how” to think rather “what” to think; and

If the subject matter being taught involves conflicting opinions, theories, or schools of thought, the teacher will ensure that differing sides of an issues are explored in order to help students develop their own critical faculties.

Recognition of Religious Beliefs, Customs & Holidays

No religious belief or nonbelief shall be promoted by the school system or its employees, and none shall be belittled. All students and staff members shall be tolerant of each other’s point of views. The school system shall use its opportunity to foster understanding and mutual respect among students and parents, whether it involves race, culture, economic background or religious beliefs (Tennessee Code Annotated [TCA] 49-6-2901-2906). In that spirit of tolerance, student and staff members shall be excused from participating in practices which are contrary to their religious beliefs. Activities shall be provided for those who wish to be excused.

Religious Holidays

Observance of religious holidays (*Florey v. Sioux Falls* [1980]) shall be as follows:

The several holidays throughout the year which have both a religious and secular basis may be observed in the public schools (TCA 49-6-3016);

The historical and contemporary values and the origin of religious holidays may be explained in an unbiased and objective manner without sectarian indoctrination;

Music, art, literature and drama having religious themes or basis are permitted as part of the curriculum for school-sponsored activities and programs if presented in a prudent and objective manner and as a traditional part of the cultural and religious heritage of the particular holiday;

The use of religious symbols that are part of a religious holiday are permitted as a teaching aid or resource, provided such symbols are displayed as an example of the cultural and religious heritage of the holiday and are temporary in nature. These holidays include Christmas, Easter, Passover, Hannukah, St. Valenitnes's [sic] Day, Thanksgiving, Halloween, Kwanzaa and Chinese New Year; and

The school district's calendar shall be prepared so as to minimize conflicts with religious holidays of all faiths.

Appendix I
Example School Board Policies

Excerpts from Ramona Unified School District Policy

Ramona, California

(Cited in Charles Haynes and Oliver Thomas, eds., *Finding Common Ground*, Section 16)

Recognition of Religious Beliefs and Customs

Preamble

Any discussion of the place of religion in public education must be grounded in the principles of religious liberty, or freedom of conscience, particularly as embodied in this nation's First Amendment to the Constitution, which states "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." [sic] This inalienable right to religious liberty depends neither upon political authority nor upon any election but is rooted in the inviolable dignity of each person.

Statement of Purpose

The board of education endorses teaching about religion where the curriculum guides indicate it is appropriate and when the classroom atmosphere encourages both teachers and students to be responsible and to respect the rights of each person.

Such teaching must foster knowledge *about* religion, not indoctrination into religion; it should be academic, not devotional or testimonial; it should promote awareness of religion, not sponsor its practice; it should inform students about the diversity of religious views rather than impose one particular view; and it should promote understanding of different religious views as well as respect for the rights of persons who hold such views.

Wicomico County Board of Education Policy

Salisbury, Maryland

(Cited in Charles Haynes and Oliver Thomas, eds., *Finding Common Ground*, Section 16)

Part 2: School Programs and Holidays

- A. School programs, performances and celebrations will serve an educational purpose. The inclusion of religious music, symbols, art or writings may be permitted if the religious content has an independent educational purpose which contributes to the state objectives of the approved curriculum.
- B. The use of religious symbols, provided they are used only as an example of the cultural and religious heritage, is permitted as a teaching aid or resource. These symbols may be displayed only for the length of time that the instructional activity requires.

- C. The Supreme Court has made clear that public schools may not sponsor religious celebrations but may teach about religion. Secular and religious holidays provide opportunities for educating students about history and cultures, as well as traditions of particular religious groups within a pluralistic society.

However, teachers must exercise special caution and sensitivity whenever discussion about religious holiday occurs. Presentation of materials dealing with religious holidays must be accurate, informed and descriptive. Focus should be on the origins, history and generally agreed-upon meanings of the holidays. Since teachers will need to be aware of the diversity of religious beliefs in their classroom and in the county at large, they will need to be particularly sensitive to the rights of religious minorities as well as those who hold no religious belief. Respect for the religious diversity in the classroom requires that teachers be fair and balanced in their treatment of religious holidays. Teachers may not use the study of religious holidays as an opportunity to proselytize or to inject religious beliefs into the discussions. Teachers can teach through attribution, i.e., by reporting that “some Buddhists believe...”

- D. On the elementary level, natural opportunities arise for discussion of religious holidays while studying different cultures and communities; in the secondary level, students of world history or literature will have opportunities to consider the holy days of religious traditions.
- E. Teachers need to be aware of the major religious holidays of all the represented religions in their classrooms so as to avoid, as much as possible, creating an undue burden on students who choose not to attend school on those days.

Appendix J

Easter Letter to the Editor

“Not Every School Child Celebrates Easter”

Letter to the Editor, the *News-Sentinel*

March 29, 2002

Recently, my son participated in an Easter egg hunt at a Knox County school. He made an Easter egg basket, collected eggs and gobbled up his candy. He loved it. The only problem is that my son is Jewish.

When I dropped off the candy each child was supposed to bring to school, I looked at his teacher and wondered what I should do.

I was sure that, if I raised my hand, she would tell me my son was not required to participate in the hunt and offer to provide an alternate activity.

I have heard that from all my children’s teachers since they started public school. But how could I explain to him that he couldn’t join his class in a search for candy hidden outside in the grass?

What would he think when his classmates returned with their happy smiles and marshmallow bunnies?

In the end, I walked out of the school, passing halls decorated with bunnies and eggs, and decided to let him have fun with his friends. I felt sad that I had to make compromises so often.

Later that day I saw my son clutching his basket, clearly enjoying its pretty decorations and candy treats.

I tried to explain that most people we know are Christian but that we’re Jewish, and even though Easter is fun, it is not one of our holidays. I even tried to explain why his school doesn’t recognize or celebrate Passover like it does Easter.

But, the truth is, I don’t understand it myself. I don’t understand why any religious holiday is celebrated in public school. I don’t understand why a public school in East Tennessee is fighting to keep its Bible study class, despite what the court says.

The truth is, I can’t figure out why any religious group would risk alienating the children who don’t believe as they do.

If you ever wonder why prayer doesn’t belong in public school, just ask my kids or ask Stephen or Yukari or Hakeem.

Ask any child who sits in his classroom during the holidays and wonders if he really belongs in his own school.

Or, you can just ask their parents. I’ll bet they have a lot to say about it, too.

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VITA

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His experience in education includes teaching social studies at Alcoa High School, Alcoa, TN (1967-1974), teaching 4th and 5th grades at Alcoa Elementary School (1974-1976 and 1978-1980) with one year (1977-78) as teaching principal at Binfield Elementary School (K-8) in Blount County, TN. From 1981 until 1995 he was the supervising principal at Fort Craig Elementary School, Maryville, TN. In 1988 he served as interim school superintendent of Maryville City Schools. Since 1995 he has been principal at Foothills Elementary School in Maryville, TN. In 1985 he earned Tennessee Career Level Classification III in Administration.

David Berry holds memberships in the following organizations: National Association of Elementary School Principals, Tennessee Association of Elementary and Middle School Principals, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Tennessee Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and Kappa Delta Pi.

