Let’s Not Play Favorites
Religion, civic values, and public education

Last year, the U.S. Supreme Court declared the city of Cleveland’s school voucher program constitutional because it took a neutral stance toward religion. Both religious and secular schooling options were available to parents. Now the political and legal struggle shifts to the states, where opponents of vouchers are pinning their hopes on the so-called Blaine amendments enshrined in the constitutions of 39 states. Named for 19th-century anti-Catholic presidential candidate James G. Blaine, these provisions are commonly understood to prohibit the use of public funds at religious schools.

Washington State relied partially on its own Blaine amendment to revoke the publicily funded scholarship of Joshua Davey, a student who had declared a major in theology at Northwest College. In its next term, the Supreme Court will again consider whether it is legitimate for a state to forbid individuals from choosing to use public dollars for religious instruction. The Court’s decision in Davey v. Locke, writes James E. Ryan in this issue’s cover story, may neutralize the Blaine amendments altogether, thereby clearing the legal path for school vouchers.

If the principle of neutrality is the key to the voucher question, is it also the best way to think about civic education? James B. Murphy believes that efforts to teach civic values in public schools ultimately place students at the nexus of the country’s culture wars. In an essay that is sure to provoke both those who want schools to advance patriotic values and those who preach social change, Murphy argues that public schools should focus on teaching students the knowledge and skills necessary to be intellectually engaged citizens, while remaining neutral on questions of civic values.

The principle of neutrality lies at the core of an equally provocative feature by Miriam Kurtzig Freedman. Freedman examines the College Board’s controversial decision to end the “flagging” of students’ scores when they are granted extended time to take the SAT because of a disability. Beginning in October 2003, some students will take the test in three hours, others in four and a half hours, and college admissions officers will no longer know the difference. Either abolish the time limit for everyone, Freedman argues, or note whose time limits have been lifted.

In this issue’s forum, Frederick Hess and Marc Tucker suggest that public schools should also remain neutral regarding where potential principals and superintendents gained their management skills and experience. Presently, most public schools are constrained by state rules to choose their leaders from the pool of candidates who have earned degrees in educational administration. Why aren’t graduates of business schools, experienced military officers, or business and nonprofit executives also eligible for a license? Do we need state licensure at all?

After all, many education schools focus less on enhancing student performance than on proposing unproven instructional approaches such as bilingual education and critical pedagogy. Christine H. Rossell follows bilingual education’s gradual demise in California in the wake of Proposition 227—and finds that achievement is climbing slowly upward in schools that adhered to voters’ wishes by abolishing the purest forms of bilingual education. Separately, J. Martin Rochester checks the ideas of self-styled “critical pedagogues” Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren.

Elsewhere in this issue, Andrew Rudalevige explains just why the sweeping reforms of the federal No Child Left Behind Act were written in ways that created a host of implementation challenges. Gary W. Ritter and Christopher J. Lucas tell us how the states are doing at addressing those challenges.

An earlier but still deeply influential set of educational theories, popularized by the likes of John Dewey and Herbert Spencer, are the targets of Lynne V. Cheney’s review of Kieran Egan’s Getting It Wrong from the Beginning. In his review of Diane Ravitch’s The Language Police, Nathan Glazer wonders whether the efforts of both the Right and the Left to promote their values through the censoring of schoolbooks are presenting an unrealistic picture of America to students. Perhaps textbook authors and publishers should adhere to the neutrality principle as well.

–THE EDITORS