

Don't Talk About "Faith-Based" Schools

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In an attempt to identify the special character of Christian schools, I often read about folks describing our Christian schools as being "faith-based". Though understandable, I want to suggest that the use of the term "faith-based" is first of all misleading, and secondly counterproductive, and as such should be erased from our vocabulary.

Faith-Based is Misleading

There is no doubt that Christian schools are faith-based. That is, we rightly celebrate a commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ over every aspect of life, and we seek to nurture children in our schools on the basis of that faith commitment. But the misleading occurs when we use the term "faith-based" to distinguish us from the government schools that exist all around us. We'll say things like, "faith-based schools have the right to develop curriculums and pedagogies that are consistent with our beliefs." Statements like this infer that there are these other schools (i.e. the government ones) that are not faith based. And that's the problem. It is a myth that there are some schools that are not faith based. All schools are faith based.

All schools, including government ones, develop mission statements, curriculum patterns, graduate profiles etc., that reflect beliefs about what makes for a good life, what makes for a good science or history program, or what role parents should have in the life of the school. They are all belief or faith-based affirmations. There is no such thing as a non faith-based school. The concept is erroneous. A Christian school is faith based. A secular school (most government school systems claim to be "free, secular and compulsory") is faith based. A Montessori school is faith based. An Islamic school is faith based.

So the term "faith-based" is misleading not because it's an improper description of Christian schools. It's misleading because it assumes that there are some schools that are not faith-based, and which are not shaped by commitments and beliefs about the world and our place and task in it. Such schools do not exist!

Faith-Based is Counterproductive

The use of the term "faith-based" is more than just misleading. It is dangerously counterproductive. To allow the specious concept of faith-based versus non faith-based to shape discussion feeds the mentality that somehow we can create school systems that are not religious. This perpetuates the common perspective that Christian schools might be a legitimate option for some families, but that most people choose the government secular school that is not faith-based. On this basis, the argument is put that taxpayer funds can be used to fund the operation of government schools because they are not indoctrinating

children based on any particular belief system, but that taxpayer funds must not be diverted into Christian schools because they operate on the basis of a certain set of faith beliefs and assumptions.

If we recognise the truism that all schools are faith-based, then the argument that we can keep faith, beliefs (or religion) out of public education falls apart. If all schools are faith-based, then it is legitimate to ask why in pluralistic countries such as the US, Canada, Australia etc., governments choose only to support secular faith-based schools and not Christian or even Montessori faith-based schools as well. Surely equity and justice demand that all faith-based schools (i.e. all schools) be treated equally in terms of government support, teacher selection, and their capacity to operate in a manner that aligns with the aims and objective of the community that each school serves.

The danger of the term “faith-based” is yet even more insidious than this. It is actually an example of pre-emptive capitulation as it cuts out the ground from underneath us. This is, it allows people who favor secular education to remain above the fray of the religious school argument. It allows them to say things like, “Let’s keep religion out of the public school” when in reality they (sometimes unwittingly) actually are clamouring for public schools to be subject to the singular controlling maxim of secular beliefs and practices. Since when was the notion that God is not relevant in education ever neutral? It is a strong, affirmation of a secular belief system which, when applied to education, forces upon children in secular schools a view of themselves and the world that is a-theistic and which denies the claim that “In God We Trust” – a claim shown on US currency since 1864, and adopted as the national motto of the United States by resolution of the 84th Congress in 1956.

Conclusion

The term “faith-based”, when it assumes that there are some schools that are not faith-based, cuts the ground out from underneath Christians in the education debate. Education is never faith-neutral. All schools are philosophically committed. If we allow the myth that some schools are not faith-based to form a basis of our discussions, we have lost the freedom-in-educational-choice argument before we have even begun. It’s another example of the tragic, dualistic tendency reflected upon several decades ago by Harry Blamires when he commented on the “sly process by which the Christian mind de-Christianizes itself without ever intending to do so.”

Let’s celebrate the faith-committed basis of all education. As Christians, we uphold the God-given right for parents to choose nurturing systems (i.e. schools) that support the belief systems of their families. We affirm that right of choice for other faith positions as well.

For our part, we believe that only Christian education can faithfully and wholeheartedly explore God’s world God’s way. Without the unnecessary distraction of faith-based versus non faith-based, we also can civilly challenge our secular friends including those shaping government schools, to explain the nature and adequacy - or inadequacy - of the faith-based education being provided for children in their school systems as well.