from Phyllis Schlafly

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Michigan Schools Drop New Age Exercises

Michigan parents scored a stunning victory when the state Department of Education recently told local public schools to remove a deep-breathing technique from its state-prescribed comprehensive health education curriculum. Parents had complained that this exercise is linked with “New Age” religious practices and can produce altered states of consciousness, posing serious medical and psychological risks to the children.

The controversial curriculum, known as the “Michigan Model,” is used in 500 of the state's 565 school districts, affecting one million students in kindergarten through eighth grade. The course has been copied or imitated in many other states, and similar concerns about curricula with New Age overtones have been raised all over the country.

The Michigan controversy came to public attention in November 1989 when L9 parents filed a lawsuit against the White Pigeon and Calhoun school districts. A pretrial hearing was held this year.

The suit alleges that the Michigan Model amounts to the “unauthorized practice of psychology and psychiatry by the teachers.” The suit also asserts that the goal of the curriculum is to change children's values, attitudes and behaviors; and parents object to “social engineers” trying to do just that.

Initially, Michigan school administrators thought they could get rid of the objections by treating parents in the patronizing and intimidating way that schools usually treat parents who dare to criticize curriculum. Schools frequently stonewall parents by warning them that they have neither the expertise nor lega1 right to critique curriculum, and sometimes get nasty, labelling parents “censors.”

When the Northville school district demanded that parents produce specific examples of what they object to in the Michigan Model, they got an answer in spades. A group called Parents Concerned With the Improvement of the Michigan Mode1 produced a 70-page booklet which documents more than 400 objectionable items, with the basis for each objection concisely explained and a recommendation given to correct each problem.

The leader of this group, R. Kraft Bell, Ph.D., is a professional business “problem-solver” who does consulting work for major U.S. corporations. The booklet, called Improving the Michigan Model, is an excellent critique of the psychological courses which now fill hours of the public school child's day, replacing time formerly spent, on the basics.

Dr. Bell organized the 400 objectionable items into five major problem areas. The first is the well-known strategy called values clarification, that is, changing children's values through ignoring traditional standards and authority.

The children are presented with hypothetical moral dilemmas, such as what to do if a child finds a purse containing $500. This dilemma is “solved” by having the children vote on what to do, rather than giving them an ethical or legal basis for action.

The second problem area is the teaching of “responsible” use of sex and illegal substances. Children are encouraged to make a personal choice about their own use of illegal substances and premarital sex, without reference to moral or state law.

Parents believe that students should be taught that illicit drug use and premarital sex are wrong. They cite studies showing that the emphasis on “responsible” use leads children to believe they can use illicit drugs and engage in premarital sex “responsibly,” and that attitude leads to unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.

The third problem area is the Michigan Model's consistently negative portrayal of parents and families. Parents assert that this “anti-family bias” creates fear, insecurity, and confusion in the children.

The fourth problem area is the use of techniques that could produce altered states of consciousness (such as deep breathing), some of which are similar to the meditative techniques of Eastern religions. Dr. Bell asserts that these “can disrupt the delicate balance of a participant's parasympathetic nervous system with far-reaching consequences” and cause “profound psychological problems of disorientation.”

The fifth objection documented by the 7o-page booklet is the invasion of family privacy. Children are encouraged “to divulge personal and family information to peers and teachers” which are none of their business.

This massive documentation of objections to the Michigan Model came to the attention of the Michigan State Legislature. The Michigan Senate held three months of hearings on the controversial curriculum in September, and a decision is expected by the end of the year on whether or not to draft legislation.

The school administrators' decision to remove the deep breathing exercise was probably a preemptive action designed to defuse the controversy and prevent the complete abolition of the course. However, Dr. Bell says that parents, efforts for real improvement in the curriculum have just begun and they are not going to acquiesce in cosmetic changes or the same abuses under a new name.