

Free to pray

Lake Forest resident Eric Buehrer is urging public schools to recognize Religious Freedom Day.

By SAM MILLER
The Orange County Register
Monday, January 16, 2006

It was the day before Eric Buehrer was to explain on 285 radio stations why kids should learn about Jesus.

In public schools.

He'd talk about how California students should learn the Ten Commandments. How Massachusetts kids should study the New Testament teachings of Paul. How it's not just him demanding it - it's the states' curriculum standards.

Are you nervous?

"Not nervous," he says. "Energized."

When you're on the air, do you feel you're doing the Lord's work?

He laughs. "That's a deep topic for a Christian. We feel like we should always be doing the Lord's work. What I get is energized by helping people. I see this as a great opportunity to turn the lights on in people's heads. There's that 'Aha!' experience."

The "aha" is the reason he became a teacher. Ultimately, it was why he left the classroom to do what he does now.

Buehrer is a culture warrior.

Today is Religious Freedom Day, a proclamation issued every year since 1993 by presidents Clinton and Bush. It passes mostly unnoticed, between Wright Brothers Day and Greek Independence Day.

This is the year Buehrer, 46, tries to change that. Using his contacts on religious radio, his support from the group Focus on the Family and his brief daily radio address (carried, he says, by 400 stations nationwide), he's urging schools to recognize the day, and use it to tell kids the rights

they have - to pray, talk about God, write essays about faith.

Buehrer - the father of three pre-teen girls, all in public schools - is the founder and full-time president of Gateways to Better Education, a Lake Forest nonprofit organization.

He helps parents and teachers bring Judeo-Christian teaching into public schools. He's sold nearly 200,000 pamphlets in which Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny inform teachers about case law regarding holidays.

He gets calls from families nationwide. A senior in Los Angeles County whose teacher wouldn't grade an essay about God. A first-grader in Placentia who told her mother the teacher wouldn't let her pray. Families upset that the school's holiday show had no Christmas songs.

Since 1991, he has traveled the country (in person and via radio waves) to share what he says is the good news about the Good News - that it has a place in public schools, and the law actually encourages it.

"The West needs to understand what made it the West," Buehrer said. Otherwise, "it's in the process of dying because you've cut off its root. ... We would enter a new age of barbarianism."

•••

Kerby Anderson, a Dallas-based radio host, leads into the theme of the Jan. 4 broadcast of "Point of View," on which Buehrer is appearing. "Something is seriously wrong and that's exactly why we're going to spend some time today talking about religious freedom."

Michael in Texas, you're on the air.

"I'm confused. The guy in California who had the Pledge of Allegiance taken out of classrooms ... I'm offended because he's offended."

"The good news," Buehrer tells him, "is there are 92,000 public schools in America and there are people of faith in every one of them. We need to quit this idea that it's somehow us against them. ... It's not as if the laws are already against us and the standards are against us. Everything's already on our side."

Last year, he surveyed the curricula of the 50 states. California, he said, has the nation's best standards when it comes to God.

In fourth grade, students learn how the introduction of Christianity affected native cultures in California.

In fifth grade, the state's framework says, social studies should "focus on one of the most remarkable stories in history: the creation of a new nation ... governed by institutions founded on the Judeo-Christian heritage."

By sixth grade, students should read and discuss Bible teachings, including Daniel and the lion's den, Ruth and Naomi, Psalms. Creation and the Ten Commandments - two exhibits in the debate over church and state - are identified as valid literature.

•••

Buehrer, who worships at Mission Hills and Saddleback churches, says it isn't just about God. He'll help you if you're Hindu, he says - though so far no one has asked.

He says it's about civil liberties.

Religious advocates have long cited the First Amendment to support religious liberties in schools, said Gene Policinski, director of the First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University.

"It goes hand in hand with the culture war over the presence of religion in public school," he said. When the group wrote a series of guidelines for public schools, liberal and conservative groups alike signed on, he said.

Buehrer doesn't advocate a theocracy. He's been asked to review textbooks - and rejected them for being too religious. He says he believes firmly in the separation of church and state, which might not please everyone in his radio audience. (Kerby Anderson was dismissive of the principle on a broadcast this month.)

Buehrer sees himself as a teacher, not a minister, and he simply wants kids to know their rights, he said. "No different from telling kids they have the right to vote when they turn 18," he said.

•••

After Buehrer appears on "Point of View," 130 people call or e-mail his office. Traffic on his Web site spikes.

A teacher in Colton will hold a discussion assembly Thursday to mark Religious Freedom Day. The organization Northwest Professional Educators e-mailed its members about the day. Buehrer hopes for feedback from other schools recognizing it.

"What we'd like to see is not even schools have to do some big official recognition - it'd be nice if they did - but if teachers would just talk to students about their freedom in the classroom," Buehrer said. "The ultimate goal is that ... this would no longer be a point of contention."

Freedom of religion on campus

Gateways to Better Education distributes a fact sheet about students' rights on religious expression. The Anti-Defamation League of Orange County and Ron Wenkart, an attorney for the county Department of Education, said the list is accurate, with some room for interpretation. Information: www.gtbe.org.

- You can pray, read your Bible and talk about your faith at school during school hours.
- You can organize prayer groups and Bible studies and announce meetings.
- You can express your faith in classwork and homework.
- Your teachers can organize prayer groups and Bible studies ... where overall context makes clear they are not participating in their official capacities.
- You may be able to go off campus to have Bible study during school hours.
- You can express your faith at school events.
- You can express your faith at graduation ceremonies.