

Bush wants to put Faith in Schools

President Bush in a Jan 30th visit to The Fishing School, a Christian based after school program, said that he wanted to open up the 21st Century Community Learning Center after-school program to faith based groups.

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=21faith.h20>

The 21st CCLC Program is a key component of the Administration's efforts to aid children. The program provides safe environments, academic enrichment and recreational opportunities. Congress has supported this initiative by appropriating \$846 million for after-school programs in Fiscal Year (FY) 2001 (up from \$453 million in 2000).

<http://www.ed.gov/21stcclc/>

The 21st CCLC Program Website states "The focus of this program, authorized under Title X, Part I, of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, is to provide expanded learning opportunities for participating children in a safe, drug-free and supervised environment. The 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CLC) program enables schools to stay open longer, providing a safe place for homework centers, intensive mentoring in basic skills, drug and violence prevention counseling, helping middle school students to prepare to take college prep courses in high school, enrichment in the core academic subjects as well as opportunities to participate in recreational activities, chorus, band and the arts, technology education programs and services for children and youth with disabilities."

About 3,600 rural and inner-city public schools in 903 communities are now participating as 21st Century CLCs supported by grants from the U.S. Department of Education. These funds enable school districts to fund public schools as community education centers keeping children safe in the after-school hours. They are located in public elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools

This program targets "latch-key kids", children who's parents must work later than the time they arrive home. These children usually arrive home to a house that is empty, with no supervision. The gap between parents' work schedules and their children's school schedules can amount to 20 to 25 hours per week says a Department of Education and Justice report.

Non-Governmental partners in this program have included such organizations as the Red Cross, Girl Scouts and The National Center for Community Education, funded by a grant from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

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21st Century Community Learning Centers report that they serve Whites 43%, African Americans 26%, Hispanics or Latinos 24%, Asians, Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders or Native Americans 6%. High-poverty persons are 66%. (http://www.ed.gov/pubs/Providing_Quality_Afterschool_Learning/report.html#addressing)

These ethnic groups each have their own faith which should not be challenged in a public school setting. Many African American families practice African or Afro-Caribbean religions such as Ifa or Santeria. Asians, Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders and Native Americans each practice their own indigenous faiths. Whites are increasingly turning to Wicca, Paganism and New Age faiths.

If a local church wins the competition for the federal funds to run a 21st CCLC within the walls of the area public school, they will be able to influence the faith of the children who attend, with or without the parents permission.

In many small communities, children may be discriminated from attending the program before or after facilitators of the program discover their faith. Some children may be encouraged to attend the program with the specific goal of religious conversion.

There will be no assurances that the religious organization that runs such a program will be able to adhere to state and federal laws concerning prayer in schools or discrimination based on faith. After-school programs would be able to lead and encourage prayer of their choosing, teach religious instruction of their choosing, and discriminate against children who did not follow along. Most state and federal regulations concerning religion in schools point to only the school day and do not regulate after-school clubs or programs considered voluntary.

After-school programs also affect the lives of children during the school day. The social interaction they receive when school is over, carries over the relationships that they have with other students and teachers of the school. Students who are discriminated against in an after-school program may find themselves discriminated against during the school day. A child who is labeled as anti-religious or non-religious because they will not conform to the religious standard of the after-school program may suffer from that labeling while in the schoolroom by teachers and administrators who support the program and its faith teachings.

What do we do as Pagan Parents and Clergy?

First and foremost, we must petition our congressmen not to open this program to faith-based organizations. We must demand that our public school grounds remain neutral in regards to faith so that all children who attend are treated on an equal basis. We must remind them that public schools are not grounds for religious teaching and conversion and that teachers, administrators and facilitators are not to be involved in the religious choices of the family.

We must watch our state, local and federal government against these trespasses against individual freedom.

Secondly, we must prepare our children for the spiritual situations that they may face both in and out of school. We are seeing our government and schools increase their efforts to control the religious lives of our children. Our children must be taught to think for themselves, to be spiritually independent and stand firm in their convictions as others may try to change them.

If we encourage our children to develop their own faith, give them skills in protecting that faith and love them for who they are, then we have ensured that our next generation will stand tall.