

This is what happens in a voucher school

A former student tells of her six dismal years in an unaccredited religious school

By Marianne Arini

Education vouchers allow parents to choose what type of school their child goes to.

Often, parents choose to send their child to a religious school, and this diverts public dollars from accredited public schools into unaccredited religious schools. My parents chose to send me to a fundamentalist Christian school from grades 7 through 12 to “protect” me from the dangers of public school.

Here’s the bizarre, behind-the-scenes account of what transpired in that school and likely what occurs in many other religious schools across the country. I attended a one-room school in the basement of our church in Brooklyn, N.Y. Our desks were lined up



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in one large room. The children aged 5 through 11 were kept on one side and adolescents aged 12 through 18 were on the opposite end.

Oppressive basement

Once one descended the steps into the basement, he or she was usually struck by the sheer oppressiveness of the space. There were only four windows, and they were eye level with the pavement outside, the only view being people’s feet as they walked by. The fourth window was eye level with the dirt of the church graveyard.

The beige walls, linoleum floors and dropped ceilings all had a plain, worn-out look to them that wasn’t enhanced by the florescent lighting. Nothing adorned the walls. Student work was never displayed, and there were no pictures or artwork of any kind exhibited.

The maximum enrollment for this school was 50 students. Most of the time, the number ranged anywhere between 35 and 45 students. We were each jalled off in our dull, brown cubicles that were partitioned on both sides, and were strictly forbidden to speak to each other.

We didn’t have teachers, lessons, blackboards or dialogues about what we were learning. Instead of lessons taught by professionals trained in their subject areas, we were given five “paces,” one for each subject. These paces were thin, poorly designed



workbooks, created by the Southern Baptist fundamentalist fountainhead, Bob Jones University, a place famous for its sexism, racism and homophobia.

Our subjects were math, language arts, history, science and either New or Old Testament survey. Math was the only subject that bore any resemblance to the standard curriculum of public schools. In the history paces, I learned a version of American history in which the forefathers were portrayed as having exactly the same religious beliefs as present-day Christian fundamentalists, and in which the Holocaust never happened. We learned Spanish from videotapes, and the school secretary taught us typing on some old typewriters. We were taken to the public park twice per month to play volleyball as our “gym class.”

Self-expression banned

That was it. There wasn’t any art, creative writing, music, drama, clubs or dance. All creative self-expression was strictly forbidden. We were taught that the self, our selves, could not be trusted. We were inherently sinful from birth. Newborn babies were sinful. Since we could not trust ourselves, we should only trust God, or rather, the fundamentalist Christian idea of God. Anything that was not directly connected to their patriarchal God or their interpretation of the bible was deemed unworthy of any time, and so, the lessons in each pace, no matter what the subject, were always skewed to contain bits and pieces of religious propaganda.

We did not discuss what we learned in these paces; we were just supposed to accept it all as fact. We were handed a goal chart every Monday, which had the days of the week marked out on it. Every student was required to write down a goal of completing three to five pages in each subject per day. If we had a question about the work we were

doing in our paces, we put up a tiny American flag into the hole on the top of our desk to signal that we needed to ask a question.

When the principal had a moment, he would come by, take down the flag, and try to answer the question. Most of the day was spent waiting for our flags to be answered. The principal was the only “teacher” we had, only he didn’t have a teaching degree. He was a phar-macist by trade.

Once we reached a self-test in a pace, we completed it, and then were required to get up, go to the scoring table, look up the answers in the score key, and score the test. Before we could get up, we had to insert a tiny Christian flag into the hole on top of our desks. If you haven’t seen a Christian flag, it’s white with a blue box in the left-hand corner and a red cross inside the blue box, signifying the blood that, according to the New Testament, was drained from Jesus’ body when he was crucified on the cross. The Christian flag alerted the principal that we needed his permission to get up. He would eventually come over, take our flags down, and grant us permission. If we had to use the bathroom, we had to use the Christian flag again to obtain permission.

Upon the completion of each pace, we had to take a test at the testing table, a long brown folding table. If we passed the test, we received a star to put on our personal, plastic-covered star chart, which hung inside each of our cubicles. Other than these three instances, we were not allowed to stand up and walk around. We were not allowed to leave the building at any point. We had two 15-minute breaks and a lunch break, during which we’d gather around to talk, starved for communication. At 2:30, the day was declared over — after the principal prayed.

Every day the same

Every day in Metropolitan Baptist Academy was exactly like the last. In describing one day to you, I’m really portraying seven years’ worth of days that were all exactly the same. Each morning, we would go up to the sanctuary for “chapel.” We would first pledge to the American flag and then turn to face the Christian flag. We would then recite:

I pledge allegiance to the Christian Flag,

And to the Savior, for whose Kingdom it stands,

One Savior, crucified, risen and coming again,

With life and liberty for all who believe.

Next, we would have to pick up the bible in front of us, lay our hand on it and say,

“I pledge allegiance to the bible, God’s holy word. I will make it a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. I will hide its word in my heart that I might not sin against God.”

After that, we’d sing “Onward Christian Soldiers,” complete with all the “us vs. them” military motifs. “Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before!” Or, some days, it was, “The Lord’s Army,” with the lyrics, “I may never march in the infantry, ride with the cavalry, shoot the artillery. I may never zoom on the enemy, but I’m in the Lord’s Army.”

When we sang the words: “march in the infantry,” we would have to march in place; ride in the Cavalry, we had to pretend we were riding a horse and bounce up and down; and “shoot the artillery,” we had to pretend we were shooting off a machine gun.

After our halfhearted singing, we’d sit through a 45-minute sermon in which we were castigated for being sinful, evil creatures, all of who owed everything to God who sent his son to be murdered for us.

The church could get away with all this because the school was unaccredited. When I asked why the school didn’t seek accreditation, I was told that if the school complied with an accrediting institution, it would have to change its curriculum to include evolution as a valid theory and would permit people who are not Christians and possibly homosexuals to work in the school.

Even as a 17-year-old, that sounded ridiculous to me.

When I was 17, 10 of the 13 girls in the school became pregnant, since there was no sex education and abortion was not an option because we had had it drilled into our heads that it was murder. Once those children were born, these girls went on government assistance and lived at or below the poverty line.

The vast majority of the students who attended this school remain Christian to this day. For me, witnessing the brainwashing, fear and control tactics, and the many lives ruined was enough to convince me of the great threat religious schools are to our youth, and the sanity of our country.

It’s imperative that we work hard to keep the separation between church and state, and keep public money out of these religious schools.

FFRF Member Marianne Arini of Arizona teaches writing and critical thinking to college students; her writing can be found at mariannearini.com/blog.

What is the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

Founded in 1978 as a national organization of freethinkers (atheists and agnostics), the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc. with 29,000 members, works to keep state and church separate and to educate the public about the views of nontheists.

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