

Groups sign truce in public school wars

'Tolerance Isn't condoning'

By David Anderson
Religion News Service

ARLINGTON, Va. (RNS)—Call it a truce in the culture wars.

Despite their differences over the propriety of prayer and religious activity in the public schools, some of the nation's most bitter ideological enemies vowed March 21 to conduct their fight in a more civil and constructive manner.

In what Education Secretary Richard Riley hailed as "good news for public education," 17 religious, civil liberties and education groups issued a six-point statement of principles affirming religious liberty and promising to end the "personal attacks, name-calling, ridicule, and similar tactics" that in recent years have characterized debate over public schools.

Signers of the statement range from the conservative Christian Coalition and National Association of Evangelicals to the liberal People for the American Way and the National Council of Churches.

Education groups signing the statement include the American Federation of Teachers, the National Ed-

ucation Association, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the National School Boards Association.

"In recent years, the public space where religion and public education meet has become an area of increasing concern for many Americans," Riley told a news conference at the Freedom Forum World Center, an Arlington, Va.-based non-profit foundation that seeks to advance First Amendment rights.

"There is an intensity surrounding this debate about religion and public education and, at times, this intensity has become corrosive and harmful," Riley said.

On the local level, many communities find themselves embroiled in religious controversy on a daily basis over such issues as what books a school library may stock, the wearing of religious garb and symbols, the role of religious clubs and the proper methods to teach religion in the schools.

While the agreement will not end those struggles, it could change the

tone of the debate, said Charles Haynes, visiting professional scholar at the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University and a prime mover behind the statement.

"When we differ, and we will, we recognize our civic responsibility to debate with civility and respect, and to engage in constructive dialogue," Haynes said.

Steve McFarland, director of the Center for Law and Religious Freedom, a legal advocacy group on behalf of religious rights, said his group signed the statement "because emphasizing fundamental common ground is more constructive than issuing militant, divisive rhetoric."

Elliot Mincberg, executive vice president of People for the American Way, a civil-liberties advocacy group, also said there were "deep and abiding differences of opinion on many important issues."

But, he added, "it is good to remind each other—and to remind ourselves—that the way we talk about fundamental American values like religious liberty, citizenship and education is important."

Can atheists be virtuous?

PRINCETON, N.J.—Can a person be good and ethical without believing in God?

Yes, according to three-fourths of American adults recently surveyed by the Gallup Poll.

Those most likely to believe this are people who do not consider religion important in their own lives, the young and the college-educated, according to a report of the poll in *Emerging Trends*, the newsletter of the Princeton Religion Research Center.

Among people who do not consider religion important in their own lives, 90 percent believe a person can be good and ethical without believing in God. That contrasts with a 66 percent approval rating by people who do consider religion important.

Among adults younger than 35, 81 percent said atheists can be good and ethical, compared to 70 percent of adults 65 and up.

ATLANTA (BP)—As America becomes more religiously pluralistic, Christians should demonstrate tolerance and knowledge of different philosophies about God, said an Atlanta researcher, author and professor. Tolerance, however, does not mean Christians must accept other religious claims as true, Bill Craig told Southern Baptist interfaith witness leaders March 20.

"The concept of tolerance implies that you disagree," Craig said. "You can't tolerate something you agree with."

"Toleration is treating those with whom you disagree with respect and charity. The correct basis of tolerance is the inherent worth of the individual, who has rights to free speech." Free speech includes sharing the gospel, but Christians should be prepared to encounter people with radically different views of God, Craig said.

To know what others believe, "do a lot of listening," Craig recommended. They may not have the principles of their beliefs logically formulated, and by listening Christians can find opportunities to witness, he suggested.