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Raija Churchill  
*Pepperdine University*

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# Given the Choice: Family Values in California's Largest School Districts

Raija Churchill

More than one in ten American public school students—6.4 million children—are educated in California.<sup>1</sup> As these students mature into adult members of society, the academic and personal effects of school district policies at the elementary and secondary levels have substantial influence on both California and the nation. One district in California allows parents to enroll elementary-aged children in release time programs for religious or moral instruction.<sup>2</sup> The same district permits students in grades seven through twelve to leave campus during the school day, without parent or guardian notification, for confidential drug counseling.<sup>3</sup> No absence is logged. Such policies are of interest to parents involved in their children's lives, but examining administrative documents and state educational laws is a time-consuming process, which parents may be unable to undertake.

School districts hold an influential middle ground in establishing California education policy: they are an intersection between state requirements and community desires. Some decisions are outside their control. California law requires every district, for example, to provide HIV/AIDS prevention education: once in middle school, once in high school.<sup>4</sup> Yet school districts have the freedom to decide whether parental permission is required for children to watch an R-rated movie, when teachers use non-district approved films to supplement classroom instruction. School district decisions matter because they shape students' daily environments. This paper will examine what happens in the area of "school choice," when

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Raija Churchill is a graduate student in law and public policy at Pepperdine University, where she is a research assistant to constitutional law professor Bernard James. She is grateful to Dr. Laura McCollum and Dr. Michael Haynes at Patrick Henry College for their guidance and advise on this paper. Any errors, however, are her own as the author.

district policy-makers are free to use their own discernment.

Through a quantitative analysis of twenty-five school districts, which are among the state's largest, this research asks what policies school districts choose to implement when California's Education Code gives them freedom to adopt or ignore policies that impact traditional moral beliefs and parental rights. These beliefs recognize that parents hold primary responsibility — and therefore, primary authority — when it comes to deciding questions such as sexual education. The research focuses on five individual policies, not mandated by state educational law:

**Religious excuses:** whether parents can obtain excused absences, for their K-12 children, when students participate in religious exercises or religious instruction.

**Confidential medical release:** whether a school will excuse 7-12 grade students from class, without logging absences and without parental notification, for medical purposes including drug counseling and surgical abortions.

**Condom availability programs:** whether high schools implement programs that offer free condoms to their students.

**Media notification:** whether parental permission or notification is required before non-district approved media, such as R-rated films, are used to supplement classroom instruction.

**Alternative materials:** whether students can be assigned alternative instructional materials of equal merit, when their parents challenge the appropriateness originally assigned instructional materials.

Excused absences for religious purposes and confidential medical release are explicitly permitted by state law, but neither is required. The remaining district policies are not directly discussed in state law, but they appear in a number of districts, and California allows these policies to stand.

To establish the context for the district policy research, this article first provides a history of school districts in California. The first section addresses the establishment and reorganization of California school

districts, the governance of such districts, and state and local sources for district policy. There is limited academic literature available for discussion regarding school districts as policy-making bodies or specifically as stakeholders in family values issues, but some research on condom programs and religious excuses is discussed in the first section. In the second section, the research design is briefly described. Finally, research findings are presented, with conclusions and suggestions for further study. Rather than showing uniform district positions on family values, the results suggest that policy types and parental involvement in California school districts may impact what policies school boards adopt.

#### CALIFORNIA SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN CONTEXT

California established school districts in 1849, when its constitution was written, but the number and size of districts have changed substantially in the 162 years since that time.<sup>5</sup> State legislators worked toward consolidating districts, and in this process of reorganization, districts given a choice often preferred the more localized control found in smaller jurisdictions. What financial incentives could not accomplish, however, state constitutional authority did. This section addresses the initial formation of school districts in California, followed by four major developments that brought the system to its current state. The overarching narrative shows a state intent on consolidating districts since 1935.

The California Constitution places school districts directly under the state legislature's jurisdiction. Legislative power is twofold: to organize districts and authorize their activities. In Article 9, Section 14, the Constitution grants legislators power "to provide for the incorporation and organization of school districts."<sup>6</sup> They may determine the classificatory system for districts of every kind, including community college districts. They also authorize school districts' governing boards to "initiate and carry on" any programs and activities that do not "conflict with the laws and purposes for which school districts are established."<sup>7</sup> This three-tiered system of powers, which places California school districts in an intermediary role between communities and the state, has held since its inception.

The number of elementary and high school districts exploded to 3,579 by the year 1935, a process driven by population expansion and growth away from an agriculturally based economy.<sup>8</sup> Legislators began seeking to consolidate districts, presumably to increase efficiency and state oversight of the education system in California. Laws enacted around 1935 allowed for the first unified districts, which combined elementary and high school districts under a single board of education, and annexed like districts.<sup>9</sup> Two or more high school districts, for instance, could be consolidated into one. Yet, reorganization was voluntary. Between 1935 and 1940, the state went from no unified school districts to forty.<sup>10</sup> The total number of school districts dropped by 213, or about eight percent, during that period.<sup>11</sup> While the data show some local willingness to consolidate, the state legislature would enact major legislation to reduce the number of elementary and high school districts over the next seventy years.

California stepped into modern school district organization with the Optional Reorganization Act of 1945, one of four key developments from the state legislature. The Act created a State Commission on School Districts that surveyed every California county and made organizational recommendations to the State Board of Education, which assumed its responsibilities when the Commission disbanded in 1949. In four years, the Commission accomplished an eighteen percent reduction to 2,111 school districts. Its survey reports, bill proposals, and other records paved the way for statewide change in school district organization.

The second major development was recommended by the Commission: higher levels of financial support for unified school districts.<sup>12</sup> Each of the six significant bills dealing with district organization passed between 1950 and 1994 provided financial incentives. The first three passed between 1950 and 1953, but all their incentives ended after the unified districts' first five years in existence. The California Department of Education describes districts' considerable reluctance to unify without "tangible financial benefits."<sup>13</sup> While early incentives helped, particularly among poor districts, communities continued to favor localized control of education.

In the third major change, legislation enacted in 1959 and 1964

moved California from voluntary to mandatory reorganization. The 1959 legislation gave counties five years to draft a master plan of district reorganization, and submit it to the State Board of Education, which proposed unified districts or intermediate steps toward unification.<sup>14</sup> If counties did not submit plans, the state would enforce its own. The 1964 legislation was primarily a financial bill, creating new incentives for reorganization and disincentives for non-reorganization.<sup>15</sup> It called unified districts the ultimate form of district organization in California, and provided minimum standards for enrollment and geographical size. Most county plans were approved by 1972.<sup>16</sup> The overall number of districts dropped nearly forty-two percent, from 2,554 to 1,067 between 1945 and 1971, and the number of unified districts increased five times to a total of 242.<sup>17</sup> Mandatory consolidation was working to tighten district organization.

The final major development occurred in 1994, with Senate Bill 1537, when the legislature tempered unification requirements. It permitted high school districts to unify without affecting feeder elementary districts, which could remain independent within the unified high school district.<sup>18</sup> The bill also addressed newly unified districts that make insufficient progress toward housing secondary students within district boundaries. At the state's discretion, such districts could be discontinued, or undergo "lapsation." These changes suggest a shift in legislative focus, from consolidation to improving the existing system for students.

The legislature's most explicit effort to decentralize was in an attempt to divide the Los Angeles Unified School District.<sup>19</sup> LAUSD had 693,597 students enrolled.<sup>20</sup> Long Beach Unified School District, the state's second largest district, had twelve percent of LAUSD enrollment.<sup>21</sup> Governor Ronald Reagan vetoed a division of LAUSD in the 1970s and no further progress was made until 1995.<sup>22</sup> The 1995 bills merely lowered the threshold for district reorganization by petition, however, and provided conditions for new districts formed from LAUSD. LAUSD remains unified today.

California moved from 3,579 school districts in 1932, to 979 school districts in 2004, a decrease of seventy-three percent.<sup>23</sup> From 1973 to 2004,

after the 1972 state approval of county plans for unification, the number of districts only decreased by seventy-five.<sup>24</sup> This relative stability follows three key phases in state policy: creation of a State Commission on School Districts, financial incentives, and mandatory reorganization. The overarching narrative of district organization in California reveals a state intent on consolidation. Districts often did not volunteer to reorganize, but legislators used authority vested in them by the state constitution to accomplish their goals. With the number of districts now fairly stable, legislators have softened unification requirements, and in some cases sought decentralization to better serve students.

#### SCHOOL DISTRICT GOVERNANCE

California possesses thirteen types of schools in total,<sup>25</sup> which represent some 9,500 individual schools.<sup>26</sup> The twelve types of public institutions include elementary, middle, and high schools; charter schools; special education schools; juvenile court schools; and others.<sup>27</sup> In addition, nine percent of California students attend private schools.<sup>28</sup> This section describes how districts are organized for conventional elementary and secondary schools, with particular emphasis on charter schools. It finds that while charter schools are separate from normal governance structures in some respects, district policies still impact their students.

Most California public school districts fall into three types: elementary, high school, and unified.<sup>29</sup> Elementary districts begin with kindergarten or first grade and continue through the sixth or eighth grades. High school districts usually include the ninth through twelfth grades, though some start with seventh grade. Unified districts are comprised of elementary and secondary schools. In geographic terms, component districts can indicate an elementary school district within a high school district, or a high school or unified district within a community college district.<sup>30</sup> Every district is governed by a board, or locally elected body, which oversees an individual district. Depending on the district, the board can be known by different names: board of education, board of trustees, etc. Across California district types, however, this board determines policies for local schools.

California became the second state in the nation to authorize charter schools, after Minnesota, when its legislature passed the Charter Schools Act of 1992.<sup>31</sup> This legislation permitted community innovation outside of normal governance structures, conditioned on accountability in academic performance.<sup>32</sup> Three California authorities grant charters: school districts grant 87.3 percent, county boards of education grant 7.2 percent, and the State Board of Education grants 5.4 percent.<sup>33</sup> Yet increased freedom to innovate does not necessarily remove charter schools from district control.

The governance of charter schools varies between dependent, independent, and “in-between” structures. These are non-legal terms, and lack official definitions, but are commonly used.<sup>34</sup> Dependent schools receive charters from a school district or county office of education, and remain under that jurisdiction.<sup>35</sup> They are subject to school district policies, except where waivers are granted.<sup>36</sup> Independent charter schools are independent legal entities, usually governed by non-profit corporations.<sup>37</sup> Finally, the in-between school is partially governed by the district or county, but the charter describes other powers reserved to the school.<sup>38</sup> In one survey of charter-granting agencies, 43 percent of charter schools were reported as either dependent or independent. The remainder was not classified in such terms.<sup>39</sup> Liability is a key factor: charter-granting authorities are accountable for charter school performance.<sup>40</sup> While charter schools are free from conventional school structures, they often remain under the governance of districts.

A 2002 RAND survey of chartering authorities provides details on district and county influence in charter schools.<sup>41</sup> In setting student disciplinary policies for independent charter schools, 16.1 percent of authorities reported control equal to conventional schools, and 23 percent reported less control. Nearly two-thirds reported no control. On curriculum decisions, 59.3 percent of authorities reported equal or less control than conventional schools, and 40.7 percent claimed none. Dependent schools show more school district and county control: only 18.2 percent of authorities, for instance, had no control over curriculum. Perhaps the most noteworthy numbers fall under special education, where 4.7 percent of authorities for independent schools and 12.1 percent of agencies for dependent schools reported more control than in conventional schools.



In 23.3 percent of independent schools (but in no dependent schools), authorities had no control over special education. There are varying degrees of district and county governance, but overall, increased control is likely in charter school special education.

Governance of conventional school districts is straightforward: boards of education oversee elementary, secondary, and unified districts, which may be located within other districts or may be geographically independent. District oversight of charter schools, however, depends on the charters granted these schools at inception. While charter schools are in part founded to gain separation from the conventional governance system, charter-granting authorities are responsible for their academic performance. This liability necessitates partial control by school districts and county governments, meaning that charter school parents should remain aware of the family values and parental rights positions taken by traditional boards of education. The men and women elected to school boards must consider input from multiple sources, while voices as diverse as local parents and federal laws tell board members what to do.

#### POLICY SOURCES

Many sources contribute to educational policy in California, beginning with community input at the district level and continuing to federal levels. From legislation such as the National School Lunch Program signed by President Harry Truman in 1946, to the more recent No Child Left Behind Act signed by President George W. Bush in 2002, federal monetary assistance comes with accountability to the national government. Because this research focuses on policies relating to family values and parental rights, however, the most pertinent sources of education policy are found at state and local levels. This section shows how California state laws directly influence education policies in this state's school districts and how districts form their policies.

In California, detailed aspects of local public school experiences are determined by statewide law. Families in urban areas might generally expect more socially liberal policies, within their school districts, than families in agricultural areas. That assumption holds some truth. Yet the California Education Code establishes common standards for every

district and public school, along with the more general California Code of Regulations, which addresses situations such as illegal discrimination. Districts must comply with state law.

This is done in two ways. First, the Education Code speaks to specific situations. A parent or guardian may file with schools annually, for example, to exempt his child from physical examination by the school.<sup>42</sup> Every public school must comply. Second, as districts come into compliance, they must interpret the law. State law provides that “schools may excuse any pupil from the school for the purpose of obtaining confidential medical services without the consent of the pupil’s parent or guardian.”<sup>43</sup> In a 1987 letter, the bill’s author told school superintendents to “be careful” in not misleading schools to believe that the law “mandates” release without parental notification.<sup>44</sup> Yet schools often view this as a question of whether students can obtain any confidential medical services, such as drug counseling or abortions, while some parents call it a question of who approves requests for medical treatment during school hours. Whatever the interpretation of this law in particular districts, the agendas and issues that school districts must consider are shaped by state law.

At the district level, the board of education has the final say in what issues are addressed and what policies are passed. This discretion can lead to significant differences between districts. In the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD), the board sought to comply with California’s Education Code and Code of Regulations prohibitions on gender discrimination. It changed SFUSD policy to say, for instance, that “transgender students shall not be forced to use the locker room corresponding to their gender assigned at birth.”<sup>45</sup> A comparable policy is found in the urban Los Angeles Unified School District, but policies on transgender and other issues are not uniform across California school districts.

District boards of education often encourage community members to participate in policy formation by presenting their thoughts during board meetings. In Riverside Unified School District, for example, Board Policy 9322 permits members of the public to request that items be placed on the agenda of a regular meeting.<sup>46</sup> If their request is granted, they may address the Board before or during its consideration of an issue, and testify on issues that are not on the agenda but fall within the Board’s jurisdiction.<sup>47</sup>

Teachers, students, parents, school medical personnel, and grassroots activists have been known to voice their opinions at such meetings, as people with vested interests in the policies set for a school district. Board meetings provide a public forum for policy-makers and local stakeholders to engage.

The California Education Code and other state laws are standardizing sources of policy for school districts across California. Districts both comply with these requirements and interpret them, as when determining non-discrimination policies for transgender restroom use on school campuses. State law also permits districts to determine their policies on family values and parental rights issues. At local levels, each board of education drafts policies, while members of the community may speak at board meetings. The result is that a unique set of rules governs each district, though all have common underpinnings found in laws from the state legislature.

#### THE CONTEXT FOR TWO VARIABLES

With ample data provided regarding condom availability programs, this paper would be remiss not to specifically address such initiatives. In 1996, the Massachusetts Supreme Court held that a condom availability program did not violate parents' rights to raise their children without unnecessary governmental intrusion or the free exercise of religion.<sup>48</sup> Junior and senior high schools in Falmouth, Massachusetts had been providing condoms to students. While junior high students were required to obtain counseling on sexually transmitted diseases from the school nurse before obtaining condoms at the vending machine, senior high school students could go directly to the machines. When the Supreme Court declined certiorari, the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruling stood: because the program was voluntary for students, it was considered constitutional, and did not require a parental opt-out provision. Though this study defines parental rights to include decisions about the sexual health aspects of students' educational environments, parents' right to dissent is not always upheld here.

Research conducted in California suggests that condom programs decrease the chance of students acquiring sexually transmitted diseases, without raising their likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors. In 1998, researchers studied a Los Angeles County high school to determine

whether a new condom program changed student behavior.<sup>49</sup> Close to 2,000 students, or ninety-eight percent, were surveyed and 1,100 were surveyed the next year. No significant difference was found in the percentage of students engaging in intercourse, but the number of males using condoms every time they engaged in such behavior rose from thirty-seven percent to fifty percent.<sup>50</sup> Since 1998, studies have found that students are not more likely to engage in sexual behavior, but are more likely to receive condom instructions and to use condoms when their schools provide the contraceptives.<sup>51</sup> Certainly, proponents and opponents of condom programs want to prevent sexually transmitted diseases among youth. During the Los Angeles school's first year of providing contraceptives, however, between 1,800 and 2,000 condoms were taken monthly.<sup>52</sup> Those who disagree with the program might observe that premarital abstinence consistently protects the students who practice it. At the least, this type of contraceptive program accepts behavior that conflicts with traditional values, when it occurs outside the husband-wife marriage relationship.

In addition to condom programs, school boards can adopt policies that excuse students from class for religious purposes. At first glance, it may seem unlikely that one district would choose both policies. Yet the United States' long tradition of religious practice and the financial benefit to districts granting religious excuses encourages districts to do so. For example, Los Angeles County has 85 school districts and had 3.8 million Roman Catholics in 2000 representing 40 percent of the county population.<sup>53</sup> Other religions represented included Judaism (5.9 percent) and Islam (1 percent).<sup>54</sup> When students miss school for religious observances, districts lose state funding that is based on average daily attendance—unless the absence is excused in keeping with state guidelines.<sup>55</sup> Whatever the motivation, excusing students for religious holidays, release time, and related purposes supports traditional beliefs.

#### RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS AND DESIGN

When designing this descriptive study, the author hypothesized that districts would carry a mixed record on issues regarding family values when given the freedom to choose their own policies, and would be more

likely to favor governmental than parental oversight. Before analyzing the data, the author expected that almost every district would both excuse students for religious purposes and provide confidential medical release. Assignment of alternative materials seemed likely more than half the time, while condom programs and media notifications would be in the minority. When it comes to classroom and campus environments, the California political climate generally favors school discretion over detailed parental involvement. At the least, this approach simplifies school governance in a system that educates millions daily, from kindergarten to high school.

Districts have the freedom to implement or reject every policy included here. Put differently, there are no state mandates on these issues. As presented earlier, five district policies are examined: excused religious absences, confidential medial release, condom availability programs, excuses on challenged instructional materials, and parental notification or permission for the use of supplementary instructional media. The policies are measured on a yes-no basis: a district either has the policy in question or it does not. The presence of each policy in a district, however, does not necessarily indicate support for traditional beliefs: a yes value on excused religious absences would indicate support, while the no value on condom programs is consistent with parental rights.

#### DESIGNING THE STUDY

This research draws primary data from California's largest districts, as measured by enrollment. The sample is small, with twenty-five districts included in the study. This approach was chosen in part because these districts represent more than 1.6 million students. In other words, these districts' policy decisions govern more than twenty-five percent of public school students in California. Based on student population, therefore, the cultural impact of these policies is quite broad.

In addition, a no response favors traditional beliefs for policies related to confidential release and condom programs. District policies on religious excuse, supplementary media, and alternative materials variables require yes responses to be consistent with parental rights. As a group, this study includes three policies that reflect traditional beliefs and parental

rights, and two that conflict with traditional values.

To determine whether more districts favor or oppose traditional morals in each policy, the study analyzes the frequency with which districts choose policies that support traditional morality. If between zero and one-third of districts support traditional beliefs, this is considered weak support for purposes of the study. One-third to two-thirds support is moderate. Crossing the two-thirds threshold is considered strong support.

#### RESEARCH FINDINGS

As the study's hypothesis predicted, districts carry a mixed record on family values issues when they are able to select their own policies. The five policies skew in favor of governmental oversight rather than parental oversight. Yet, results for specific variables did not always match the predictions given. This section examines results for the five variables, seeks correlation between individual variables, and provides an analysis of the eleven California counties represented by this sample population.

All twenty-five districts passed policies permitting excused absences for religious purposes, making this the sole variable with 100 percent support for traditional values. It clearly surpasses the threshold for strong support of a policy – two-thirds of the districts, or fifteen in twenty-five – with its uniform acceptance of religious excuses.

The second policy, confidential medical release, shows moderate support among California districts. A surprising forty percent (ten districts) does not have a district-level policy permitting school officials to excuse students from classrooms, without parental permission or notification. This leaves fifty-six percent (fourteen districts) that does offer confidential medical release to junior and senior high school students. While results lie in the moderate range, they reflect somewhat stronger support for school oversight than parental oversight, in determining who permits students to leave campus for medical appointments.

Condom availability programs reflect strong support for traditional morality, with only twenty-four percent (six districts) adopting policies to provide contraceptives on high school campuses. Though the sample population includes twenty-four unified school districts and only one

elementary district—meaning that twenty-four districts include high schools—seventy-six percent of districts surveyed do not provide condom programs by board policy. The results are mostly consistent with values reserving sexual guidance to families, rather than sharing it with schools.

Clovis Unified, which is located slightly northeast of Fresno, takes an unusually strong stand against such programs. Its policy states that “provision of contraceptives is inconsistent with the Board’s position specifying abstinence as the primary message to be communicated to students,” in instructional programs that seek to prevent sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>56</sup> Ninety-four percent of California schools offer HIV/AIDS prevention education, which is required by state law, according to a 2003 study by the American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California and others.<sup>57</sup> While state law requires instruction to “emphasize that sexual abstinence” is among “the most effective means for HIV/AIDS prevention,”<sup>58</sup> Clovis is the only district to explicitly prohibit a contraceptive program.

The fourth policy is the assignment of alternative instructional materials to individual students, when their parents challenge instructional materials that schools originally intended to use. A yes response indicates that students may receive alternative assignments of equal merit, usually at the written request of parents or guardians. With forty-four percent (eleven districts) offering alternative assignments and fifty-two percent (thirteen districts) not providing alternatives, this variable shows moderate support for parents’ rights in guiding student education. While results lean toward school oversight, this is only a two district difference.

Finally, policy five is the adoption of parental permission or notification for supplementary media used in the classroom. These audiovisual materials are not district-approved, though district policies may require teachers to obtain administrative approval of specific items before classroom use. While other policies in this study have standard definitions, this variable allows a wide range of policy components: districts may only require parental permission for PG-13 and R-rated films, prohibit all R-rated films, require parents to be present when students watch R-rated films, and so forth. Every yes response for variable five,

however, indicates a school district that provides some level of parental permission or notification.

Saddleback Unified, Lodi Unified, and West Contra Costa Unified districts were coded as no responses, though they have policies on supplemental media, because they omit parental permission and notification. For instance, West Contra Costa only permits use of G-rated films, and requires administrative rather than parental approval of supplemental materials.<sup>59</sup> This suggests weak support for parental rights in the area of supplemental media: while twenty-four percent (six districts) inform parents of such materials, seventy-two percent (eighteen districts) do not involve parents and guardians in the decision-making process.

Among the policies tested in this study, two reflect strong support for traditional beliefs and parental rights. These are excuses for religiously-motivated absences (100 percent) and the lack of condom programs (seventy-six percent). Two policies show moderate support: confidential medical release skews in favor of school oversight (fifty-six percent), while districts are slightly more likely to not provide alternative assignments to challenged materials (fifty-two percent). The final policy shows weak support for parental rights (twenty-four percent), as eighteen districts require neither notification nor parental permission. With two policies in clear support of traditional morality, two in the moderate range, and one in strong conflict, these policies reveal no uniform world-view or policy approach regarding family values, but show marked variation by district.

District policies appear most family-friendly when it comes to student behavior outside the classroom: absences for religious purposes (100 percent), contraceptive use (seventy-six percent), and confidential medial release (fifty-two percent). When it comes to instruction within the classroom, trends shift. Districts are less likely to respect parents' oversight of their children's educational experiences by assigning alternative materials (forty-four percent) or providing multimedia notification (twenty-four percent). Given the district's influential role as a middle ground between state mandates and community desires, these results could suggest increasing parental satisfaction, as policies move from behavior outside classrooms to instruction within classrooms. Yet parents are more likely



to be aware of their children's need to be excused for a religious holiday than of the difference between a district-approved classroom video and a supplementary classroom video. While parental involvement falls outside the scope of the present study, declining district support for traditional morals may reflect declining parental involvement.

#### COUNTY BREAKDOWN

This sample population represents eleven California counties, which cluster in Southern California (seven counties), but include the northern Bay Area (two counties) and the Central Valley (two counties). Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Diego Counties each have four districts in the sample population. Alameda, San Bernardino, West Contra Costa, Orange, and Fresno Counties each have two districts. Santa Clara, Sacramento, and San Joaquin each have one. Los Angeles further represents the most enrolled students, at 782,131 students, while Riverside has 146,706 and San Diego has 130,202. These three counties alone account for sixty-five percent of total enrollment, among the twenty-five districts studied.

San Diego County's four districts are the most family-friendly among those studied, with three districts fully meeting the criteria for family-friendly policy: yes on religious excuses, no on confidential medical release, no on condom programs, yes on alternative materials, and yes on parental permission or notification for supplementary media. These districts were Sweetwater Unified, Poway Unified, and Vista Unified. Only two additional districts met this criteria, in San Bernardino County (San Bernardino City Unified) and Riverside County (Desert Sands Unified). The fourth San Diego district provided excuses for religiously-motivated absences, but that was the only policy found among the five variables. Only three districts showed complete conflict with traditional values, when the religious excuse variable was removed. These districts were in Alameda County (Oakland Unified), Contra Costa County (West Contra Costa Unified), and Riverside County (Temecula Valley Unified), providing no uniformly "worst" county.

### INTO THE FUTURE

The small sample population drawn upon in this study provides a starting point for future research: though this study covers more than 25 percent of the public school enrollment in California, it includes less than 3 percent of the state's school districts. Further, as districts decrease in enrollment size, they are more likely to be elementary districts. Confidential medical release and condom availability programs should be irrelevant there. Providing a comprehensive picture of campus environments with regard to these variables requires a larger and likely randomized study of districts. A new study should control for differences between unified and elementary school districts, given differences in the demographics that each district type serves.

The earlier distinction between behavior outside classrooms and instruction within classrooms may also merit consideration as researchers consider aspects of the parent-school relationship. Though many parents are involved in students' homework and class assignments, it is possible that religious release time and condom programs are more visible to parents, or at least encourage more active parent-school interaction. If religious excuses are granted because parents remove their children regardless, and if parents are less likely to challenge instructional material or inquire about supplementary films, their involvement may be significant in whether districts choose policies that support or conflict with traditional values and parental rights.

In researching for this study, the author found many policies directing district personnel to provide "comprehensive health and social services" on or near school sites. Los Angeles Unified provides "free, primary health care to students who have signed parental consent or who are emancipated minors."<sup>60</sup> Services include birth control, testing and treatment for sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy counseling, and crisis and short-term individual and family mental health therapy.<sup>61</sup> While the author has conducted limited research on school-based health centers in California, further examination of this subject could explore parental awareness of the full range of services, with the frequency that minor students avail themselves of such medical and psychological services.

## CONCLUSION

The 6.4 million students in California's public schools are impacted by district-level policies each day, from the kindergartener's ability to miss class for a religious ceremony without penalty, to whether a ninth grade student finds condoms on his high school campus. School districts have changed substantially since they were established by the state constitution in 1849. After decades of state work to consolidate school districts, with financial incentives and mandatory reorganization, the number of districts stabilized at fewer than 1,000. Districts grew geographically, but retained local connection. As a governing body elected from and located in the community, the district board of education draws policies from state mandates and community desires, including policies related to traditional morals and parental rights. It holds a vital middle ground: board members interpret and apply state policy, while providing local stakeholders with an access point for speaking on the policies that shape students' everyday experiences.

In their capacity as a middle ground, district boards often hold the power to determine whether they will adopt policies that support or conflict with traditional moral beliefs and parental rights. Using the absence of state mandates as an independent variable, this study finds that the sampled school districts strongly support traditional morality in two dependent variables, offer moderate support in two variables, and clearly conflict with such beliefs in the final variable. These variables reveal no standard policy approach to family morals, but highlight the individual nature of district-level policy-making. The results also suggest that where parents are more aware of district policy, districts are more likely to support their oversight role as parents and support traditional morals. Yet, confirming that is a topic for another study. This study illustrates that district policy-making is not a cookie cutter affair. At the same time, it falls short of providing strong assurance to parents that districts will support their efforts to be aware of their children's exposure to films and other media—or even of their children's location during the school day—when school districts are given the choice.

ENDNOTES

1. "Table 232, Public Elementary and Secondary Schools and Enrollment—States: 2004-2005," The 2008 Statistical Abstract: The National Data Book, U.S. Census Bureau, 2008, <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/tables/08s0232.pdf>. Eleven percent of publicly educated students, in the United States, is enrolled in a California public school.
2. "Rules of the Board of Education, Administrative Guide," Los Angeles Unified School District, 190 (2007), digital copy.
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