

Iowa's changing religious demographics

We aren't all Protestants any more

Informing policymakers through research

The issue. Public schools are historically grounded in Protestant Christianity. Many of our schooling practices, from Christmas programs to weekly “church night,” are still loosely Protestant Christian. However, changing religious demographics show the Protestant majority is shrinking.

According to our research. Nationally, what used to be an overwhelming Protestant majority is now only 51 percent. Catholics come in second, at 24 percent, and all other faiths at about 9 percent. The fastest growing religious – or non-religious – demographic is the unaffiliated, at 16 percent, which has doubled over the last twenty years. Iowa's religious demographics are similar to those reflected in national figures.

Because religious demographics are changing, school leaders have to be more aware of ways their traditional schooling practices might offend people of a minority religion or people of no religion. At the same time, they have to respect the practices of the devout. It's not an easy line to walk.

The news is filled with examples of school districts that do not walk this line successfully, from the Louisiana district ordered to stop allowing Bible distribution in schools to the New Jersey district cited for banning instrumental Christmas music.

However, there are some success stories. One local example is the Des Moines metro-area superintendents' decision to move their Friday night football games to Thursdays in order to accommodate Rosh Hashanah.

We recommend. Changing religious demographics in Iowa and across the nation require us to evaluate what we do. There are three questions to ask:

- 1) What religion-related practices are currently in place?
- 2) What educational purpose does this school practice serve?
- 3) Does that educational purpose violate anyone's religious or non-religious belief?

Asking and acting upon these questions will make educational leaders proactive rather than reactive.

For more information, visit:
www.hs.iastate.edu/makeadifference

This policy brief is based on published research:

Marshall, J. M. (2008). Whose religious values? Managing changing religious demographics in a school community legally and pro-actively. *The School Administrator*, 65(5), 28-32.

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