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## **Facing faith in American Public Schools**

By Charles C. Haynes

Beginning this fall (2009), students in Jodi Ide's class at Brighton High School will go beyond textbook discussions of world religions and engage directly with students in Pakistan, India and elsewhere who actually practice the faith traditions covered in the curriculum.

And, yes, this is an American public school.

Brighton, located in Canyons School District, Utah, is among the first 25 schools in the United States (the others are in California, New York, Washington and Georgia) to introduce Face to Faith, an innovative global schools program sponsored by the Tony Blair Faith Foundation.

Currently active in over 250 schools in 15 countries, Face to Faith is built on a simple but profound idea: Provide students of different faiths and beliefs across the world opportunities to learn directly with, from and about each other. By means of video-conferencing and an online community, students investigate global issues of common concern and explore how their beliefs and values shape their understanding of those issues.

The Tony Blair Faith Foundation formally launched [Face to Faith](#) in the U.S. in 2009 as part of the "Partners for a New Beginning" commitment at the Clinton Global Initiative's annual meeting in New York.

Responding to President Barack Obama's call in Cairo, Egypt, for "a new beginning" between the U.S. and the Muslim world, Tony Blair's foundation promises to expand the program to at least 120 American schools by 2011, placing special emphasis on linking young people in this country with their peers in Muslim-majority countries, including Jordan, Pakistan, Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories and Indonesia.

But as Jodi Ide and other American teachers know all too well, introducing an educational program with "faith" in the title into public schools inevitably raises First Amendment red flags. In spite of progress in recent years in reaching consensus about the need to address religion in the curriculum, conflicts continue to break out over how religion is treated. Not surprisingly, some school board members, educators and parents are skittish when they first hear about Face to Faith.

That's why the Religious Freedom Education Project at the Newseum in Washington, D.C., is helping the Tony Blair Faith Foundation implement Face to Faith in U.S. public schools using First Amendment principles. Within a clearly articulated First Amendment framework, Face to Faith classroom activities and discussions that touch on religion will be conducted in an environment free of advocacy on the part of the teacher. While students will be encouraged to express their own beliefs when germane to the discussion, teachers will teach about religions in ways that are academically and constitutionally sound.

Face to Faith, in other words, is not a "religion" program; it is an educational program designed to increase young people's cultural and religious literacy and to encourage respect for the rights of others among students of all faiths and beliefs. After a contentious summer of anti-mosque protests and threats of Qur'an burning, Face to Faith arrives in schools none too soon. What Jodi Ide's students learn from other young people across the world today can do much to prevent intolerance and hate tomorrow.

Face to Faith is not only consistent with the First Amendment, it is an extraordinary opportunity to advance First Amendment principles by encouraging student voice, modeling religious liberty, and educating for understanding across faiths, beliefs, cultures and nationalities. Can we do this in American public schools? We must.

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