



To Stand or Not to Stand

By Tamara Uselman, Director of Equity and Inclusion

To Stand or Not to Stand, That Is the Question Individuals Must Answer

Someone once told me about a time they were in the checkout line at JCPenney just behind what appeared to be a three generation trio. The grandmother-looking-person, leaning down and beaming at the toddler, said, “Are you going to get some new *sockies* today? Are you? New *sockies*?” She waived a package of socks in the air.

The mom-looking-person interjected fiercely, “I told you! We don’t use #*\$@! baby talk with the kids! Our children will speak like grownups.”

One thing every parent knows is that the toddler may or may not ever say “*sockies*,” but she certainly just learned how to say “#*\$@!” with profound intonation.

My intent in telling you about the “*sockies*” is not to say the grandmother was right and the mom was wrong or vice versa. Rather, avoiding baby-talk was a hot button issue for the mom, while it seemed to be a normal way to talk for the grandmother, and together, they missed the goal, because the toddler likely learned adult words that neither of the grownups wanted her to learn.

For many people, standing for the “Pledge of Allegiance” is a hot button issue, far hotter than the baby-talk debate. Perhaps standing for the pledge is a hot button because democracy is never built - as in past tense, completed, done, in place for good - but rather always being built, alive, in the moment, and in need of protectors. Yet while some people have good reasons and deep passion for standing for the pledge, forcing people to stand misses one goal that’s very central to democracy; that being the freedom to choose. Fargo Public School (FPS) Policy [AP 4275](#) is clear on forced patriotic expressions. AP 4275, a 12-year old administrative policy, states, “The Board and Administration believes that the children of the Fargo Public School should learn the principles of liberty and democracy expressed in the United States Constitution, the North Dakota Constitution, the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights...” yet, “This policy recognizes that the beliefs of some students and teachers prohibit their participation in these patriotic exercises,” and finally, “*No person shall be required to salute, stand, or otherwise participate in this exercise if it is against his/her beliefs.*”

Why wouldn’t everyone want to stand for the pledge? Part of the answer may lie in history. The pledge was written in 1892 by minister-turned-advertising exec, Francis Bellamy, who wanted to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’s arrival in America. Quoting *Teaching Tolerance Magazine*, Bellamy feared that, “every alien immigrant of inferior race” was finding a home in the United States. (Imagine America’s Indigenous population’s perspective on Bellamy’s thinking.)



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The pledge has changed somewhat over the last 130 years in at least three ways. First, Bellamy had wanted the pledge to be said with a “raised arm salute,” but that’s not commonly done anymore. Second, students pledged to “my flag” until 1923 when “the Flag of the United States of America” was added in response to increased immigration. Finally, “one nation under God,” was added during the Cold War (1954), as a way to suggest that while communists were “godless,” Americans weren’t.

Where does that leave us today? As tempting as it may feel, our big work is not to demand that any school employee or student stand for the pledge. Federal law and school policy clearly state that no one may be forced to stand for the pledge, though some state laws require parent involvement. Before anyone rushes to judgement about disrespect, FPS policy is equally clear that, “All persons, however, are expected to show respect to the flag and to the participation of others in the exercise”. So this leaves us here: following policy and federal law is not only required but also a way to protect democratic freedoms. Living in a free country means citizens may choose to participate or not to participate, while being respectful of others’ choices. When it comes to the question of, “To Stand or Not to Stand”, the big work is to remember that in a democracy, each person and each social group has a deep story and a social truth, and that each social group gets to choose, within the limits of the law and school policy, how to respectfully express that freedom.

