Is there room for spirituality in schools?
Arguments for (by Jon Gaffney) and against (by Corey Madoni).

In February of 1998, a lawsuit was filed against two Waldorf-Method Schools in California. The Plaintiff claimed that these schools were endorsing Wiccan practices and Anthroposophy as religion, thereby violating the First Amendment. Although a court ruled in 1999 that the Waldorf schools have a secular, non-religious purpose for their teaching, the case as to whether they unintentionally endorse a religion is outstanding; the trial has been scheduled for September of 2005\(^1\).

This lawsuit seems misguided, given the information statement of one of the schools in question (Twin Ridges), which claims, “The Waldorf instructional method emphasizes the whole child and frames its academic components within an artistic, creative and imaginative context” but makes no mention of Wicca or anything that might be construed as religion. The supporting philosophy of anthroposophy is not even mentioned; that philosophy will be explored soon. A mission statement for a local Waldorf School reads similarly, implying that the goal of education is “to develop a balance of intellectual achievement, spiritual growth, physical health and personal responsibility\(^3\).” The focus of these schools is clearly on nurturing the young students in a way that encourages more than simply learning facts. Rather, it involves some sort of underlying assumption that the students are people, and as such they have certain needs that should be addressed. The acknowledgement of these needs in a fruitful way in the classroom is the role of spirituality.

Spirituality is not religion. While it may utilize spirituality, religion also involves much more, including beliefs, institutional affiliation, creeds, dogma, and, perhaps most importantly, instructions on how to live. Spirituality claims none of these things; it
provides no guide for life; it merely acknowledges that there is a human experience to be lived. For example, “Anthroposophy is a human oriented spiritual philosophy that reflects and speaks to the basic deep spiritual questions of humanity… and to the need to develop a relation to the world in complete freedom and based on completely individual judgments and decisions.” Presumably, an education built on that philosophy would acknowledge the needs of the individual and not try to provide guidelines for living, as opposed to the ambitions of religion.

Spirituality can benefit education in a variety of ways. First, it emphasizes holistic education, measuring success by “not simply what students know or learn but what they become.” This can be supported through a variety of views about the role of spirituality in education (as presented by Yob). Cully supports the view that “hearts are restless” and that spirituality is a quest for inner peace; as such teachers should support students’ quests rather than denying their internal need. Westerhoff and Eusden emphasize the meeting of Eastern and Western philosophy in mysticism – taking on eyes of wonder with which to see the world. Finally, Palmer presents and interweaving of the knower and the known; he discourages the objective disengagement of facts and theories in lieu of the possibility of evoke, address, and admitting human qualities into studies.

Through all of these views, instructors would have a prime opportunity to address critical thinking in the world of belief and disbelief, a topic long avoided through fear. We address critical thinking in other aspects of study, such as science and literature. We should not neglect it a topic so completely human as belief.

Finally, spirituality can play a vital role in science. We should not be completely objective in our treatment of science, because it is a human enterprise. Many of the
contributors to the scientific world are or were deeply spiritual, and all of them are or were human and dealt with the living condition. We should therefore acquaint students with their struggles and their decisions. Many times, the spiritual quest of the scientists led them into science; the students should view the topics with the same awe and wonder as the scientists. As Yob implies, we have neglected important capacities for the learner; we would not jeopardize our scientific enterprises if we made room for alternate ways of knowing. Rather, we would provide students with an added force that may move them in meaningful ways.

Advocates of spirituality in education propose, “the final outcome of spiritual education is the integration of the person internally and with the rest of the cosmos accompanied by ensuing activity to establish social justice, community, and freedom. We might ask: Has not this always been a goal of public schooling and does it not remain so? For if this is the case, there is no cause for fear or lawsuits. But there is good cause for spirituality.

Spirituality is a form of religion. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines spirituality as “something that in ecclesiastical law belongs to the church or to a cleric as such” and “sensitivity or attachment to religious values.” People who try to separate spirituality and religion are trying to skirt around the Establishment Clause of the 1st Amendment which states “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” By claiming that spirituality is not religion these people are attempting to bring their beliefs into schools, which are paid for by everyone’s taxes. Schools must be kept free of religion because public education is a right of every
person. There are enough problems facing children today without having to deal with schools creating additional conflicts by supporting one religion over others.

Allowing spirituality will move towards a slippery slope that could lead to many more religious differentiations allowed in public schools. By bringing religion into public schools people will again segregate into particular schools based upon different religious beliefs.

The Waldorf schools are based on spirituality principles developed through anthroposophy and therefore should be kept as private schools just as schools whose methods are based on Catholicism or Judaism. “In general, the Court has demonstrated a willingness to strike down any practices that might be likely to be perceived either as coercive or as a state endorsement of religion.” The Third Circuit Court declared a course on transcendental meditation in a New Jersey high school to be religious instruction and therefore illegal even though the ideas did not contain moral code, organized clergy, holidays, or ceremonies for passage.

Of all areas of education, spiritually does not belong in the science classroom. Science teachers face a huge quantity of standards and ideas to cover without getting into spirituality. The place for spirituality to be addressed is in social studies, ethics, or literature classes where the different religious ideas and beliefs can be historically compared and analyzed to find common themes as well as differences. In this situation a variety of philosophies are covered instead of having one principle set of ideas run over all areas of the students’ education. According to Beckner, John Morse (one of the Waldorf-Method Schools named in the lawsuit) students were close to the district average on mandated tests, but scored below other small specialized schools.
Science education seems to lose some importance in the education of children in spirituality schools. The Waldorf school of Pittsburgh’s mission statement highlights this problem by never even mentioning science, but instead focusing on “fairy tales, legends, myths and history, and the outer life with the development of individual and social skills.” Waldorf students do not even move into science work beyond “nature stories, house building, and gardening” until at least fourth grade, and even then, science is taught historically.

Citations:
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[16] See [3]