

Essentials in Education

BIBLE LITERACY PROJECT

An educated person is familiar with the Bible

An Overview of First Amendment Guidelines

Excerpted from *The Bible and Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide*, co-published by the Bible Literacy Project and the First Amendment Center, and endorsed by the National School Boards Association, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the National Association of Evangelicals, the American Jewish Congress, and 17 other national educational, religious and advocacy organizations.

The Bible and the Public-School Curriculum

Educators widely agree that study about religion, where appropriate, is an important part of a complete education. Part of that study includes learning about the Bible in courses such as literature and history. Knowledge of biblical stories and concepts contributes to our understanding of literature, history, law, art, and contemporary society.

What do the courts say?

The Supreme Court has held that public schools may teach students about the Bible as long as such teaching is “presented objectively as part of a secular program of education.”¹ ...U.S. Department of Education guidelines reiterate that public schools “may not provide religious instruction, but they may teach about religion, including the Bible or other scripture.”² In keeping with the First Amendment’s mandate of governmental neutrality toward religion, any study of religion in a public school must be educational, not devotional. This principle holds true whether teaching about the Bible occurs in literature, history or any other class and whether the course is required or an elective.

A relatively small number of lower court decisions have dealt directly with the constitutionality of Bible classes in public schools.³ These rulings show that the constitutionality of such classes is highly dependent on such factors as how the class is taught, who teaches it, and which instructional materials and lessons are used.

How the class is taught: Any class about the Bible must be taught in an objective, academic manner.⁴ The class should neither promote nor disparage religion, nor should it be taught from a particular sectarian point of view.⁵

Who teaches the class: A superintendent or school board should select teachers for a class about the Bible in the same manner all other teachers are selected.⁶ School districts should not delegate the employment of such teachers to an outside committee that selects teachers based upon their religious beliefs or perspectives.⁷ Teachers should be selected based upon their academic qualifications, rather than their religious beliefs or non-beliefs.⁸ Teachers should not be disqualified, however, simply because they have received religious training.⁹

Funding for an elective course in religion may be provided by outside sources as long as the funds are contributed with “no strings attached.”¹⁰

Which instructional materials are used: Decisions concerning instructional materials, including which translation of the Bible may be used, should remain under the control of the board of education.¹¹ The Bible may be used as a primary text, although it probably should not be the only text for a course.¹² Schools should avoid the use of instructional materials and lessons that are of a devotional nature, such as those used in a Sunday school. Supernatural occurrences and divine action described in the Bible may not be taught as historical fact in a public school.¹³ The historicity of many persons and events described in the Bible may or may not be confirmed by evidence outside of biblical literature.

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Teaching ‘about’ the Bible

If teachers are to understand clearly how to teach about the Bible – and to feel safe doing so – then local school boards should adopt policies on the role of study about religion in the curriculum. The policy should reflect constitutional principles and current law, and should be developed with the full involvement of parents and other community members. Parents need to be assured that the goals of the school in teaching about religion, including teaching about the Bible, are academic and not devotional, and that academic teaching about the Bible is not intended to either undermine or reinforce the beliefs of those who accept the Bible as sacred scripture or of those who do not. Faith formation is the responsibility of parents and religious communities, not the public schools.

In recent years, a consensus has emerged among many religious and educational groups about the appropriate role for religion in the public-school curriculum. In 1989, a coalition of 17 religious and educational organizations issued the following statements to distinguish between teaching about religion in public schools and religious indoctrination:

- The school’s approach to religion is *academic*, not *devotional*.
- The school may strive for student *awareness* of religions, but should not press for student *acceptance* of any religion.
- The school may sponsor *study* about religion, but may not sponsor the *practice* of religion.
- The school may *expose* students to a diversity of religious views, but may not *impose, discourage, or encourage* any particular view.
- The school may *educate* about all religions, but may not *promote* or *denigrate* any religion.
- The school may *inform* the student about various beliefs, but should not seek to *conform* him or her to any particular belief.¹⁴

When teaching about the Bible in a public school, teachers must understand the important distinction between advocacy, indoctrination, proselytizing, and the practice of religion – which is unconstitutional – and teaching about religion that is objective, nonjudgmental, academic, neutral, balanced, and fair – which is constitutional.

Which Bible?

Selecting a Bible for use in literature, history, or elective Bible courses is important, since there is no single Bible. There is a Jewish Bible (the Hebrew Scriptures, or Tanakh), and there are various Christian Bibles – such as Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox – some with additional books, arranged in a different order. These differences are significant. For example, Judaism does not include the Christian New Testament in its Bible, and the Catholic Old Testament has 46 books while the Protestant has 39. There are also various English translations within each of these traditions.

To adopt any particular Bible – or translation – is likely to suggest to students that it is normative, the best Bible. One solution is to use a biblical sourcebook that includes the key texts of each of the major Bibles or an anthology of various translations.

At the outset and at crucial points in the course, teachers should remind students about the differences between the various Bibles and discuss some of the major views concerning authorship and compilation of the books of the Bible. Students should also understand the differences in translations, read from several translations, and reflect on the significance of these differences for the various traditions.

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Which interpretation?

The Bible is interpreted in many different ways, religious and secular. For example: In Judaism, the Hebrew Bible is typically read through the eyes of various rabbinic commentators. For Roman Catholics, the authoritative interpretation of the church is crucial for understanding the Bible. Some Christians and Jews use the findings of modern secular scholarship to interpret the Bible, while others reject some or all of modern scholarship.

Because there are many ways to interpret the Bible – religious and secular – public-school teachers should expose students to a variety of interpretations. Teachers should allow students to encounter the text directly (like any primary source), and then draw on the resources of different religious and secular interpretative traditions for understanding it. To do this effectively requires the use of secondary sources that provide a discussion of the various religious and secular approaches to the Bible.

Teacher selection and preparation

Teaching about the Bible, either in literature and history courses or in Bible electives, requires considerable preparation. School districts and universities should offer in-service workshops and summer institutes for teachers who are teaching about the Bible in literature and history courses.

The Bible and literature

Academic study of the Bible in a public secondary school may appropriately take place in literature courses. Students might study the Bible as literature. They would examine the Bible as they would other literature in terms of aesthetic categories, as an anthology of narratives and poetry, exploring its language, symbolism, and motifs. Students might also study the Bible in literature, the ways in which later writers have used Bible literature, language, and symbols. Much drama, poetry, and fiction contains material from the Bible.

Bible electives in literature

A literature elective in the Bible would focus on the Bible as a literary text. This might include the Bible as literature and the Bible in literature. A primary goal of the course would be basic biblical literacy – a grasp of the language, major narratives, symbols, and characters of the Bible. The course might also explore the influence of the Bible in classic and contemporary poems, plays, and novels.

Of course, the Bible is not simply literature – for a number of religious traditions it is scripture. A “Bible Literature” course, therefore, could also include some discussion of how various religious traditions understand the text. This would require that literature teachers be adequately prepared to address in an academic and objective manner the relevant, major religious readings of the text.

The Bible and history

The study of history offers a number of opportunities to study about the Bible. . . . Learning about the history of the Bible, as well as the role of the Bible in history, are appropriate topics in a variety of courses in the social studies.

Bible electives in history

An elective history course that focuses on the Bible is a difficult undertaking for public schools because of the complex scholarly and religious debates about the historicity of the Bible. Such a course would need to include non-biblical sources from a variety of scholarly perspectives. Students would study archeological findings and other historical evidence in order to understand the history and cultures of the ancient world. Teachers who may be assigned to teach a history course focused on

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the Bible need a great deal of preparation and sophistication.

Unless schools are prepared to design a course that meets the above requirements, they will face legal and educational challenges. In view of these requirements, most public schools that have offered a Bible elective have found it safer and more age-appropriate to use the Bible literature approach discussed earlier in this guide.

Schools must keep in mind that the Bible is seen by millions of Jews and Christians as scripture. For adherents of these faiths, the Bible makes sense of events in terms of God's purposes and actions. This means that the Bible may not be treated as a history textbook by public-school teachers but must be studied by examining a variety of perspectives – religious and non-religious – on the meaning and significance of the biblical account.

As we have already noted, sorting out what is historical in the Bible is complicated and potentially controversial. Teachers who teach a history course focused on the Bible need to be sensitive to the differences between conventional secular history and the varieties of sacred history. Students must learn something about the contending ways of assessing the historicity of the Bible. They cannot be uncritically taught to accept the Bible as literally true, as history. Nor should they be uncritically taught to accept as historical only what secular historians find verifiable in the Bible.

Sometimes, in an attempt to make study about the Bible more “acceptable” in public schools, educators are willing to jettison accounts of miraculous events. But this too is problematic, for it radically distorts the meaning of the Bible. For those who accept the Bible as scripture, God is at work in history, and there is a religious meaning in the patterns of history. A Bible elective in a public school may examine all parts of the Bible, as long as the teacher understands how to teach about the religious content of the Bible from a variety of perspectives.

¹ *School District of Abington Township v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203, 225 (1963). See *Stone v. Graham*, 449 U.S. 39, 42 (1980) (per curiam).

² “Religious Expression in Public Schools,” Department of Education, Letter from Secretary Richard Riley (August 10, 1995) (original emphasis).

³ See *Hall v. Board of Commissioners of Conecuh County*, 656 F.2d 999 (5th Cir. 1981); *Gibson v. Lee County School Board*, 1 F. Supp.2d 1426 (M.D. Fla. 1998); *Chandler v. James*, 985 F. Supp. 1062 (M.D. Ala. 1997); *Herdahl v. Pontotoc County School District*, 933 F. Supp. 582 (N.D. Miss. 1996); *Doe v. Human*, 725 F. Supp. 1503 (W.D. Ark. 1989), *aff'd* without opinion, 923 F.2d 857 (8th Cir. 1990), cert. denied, 499 U.S. 922 (1991); *Crockett v. Sorenson*, 568 F. Supp. 1422 (W.D. Va. 1983); *Wiley v. Franklin*, 468 F. Supp. 133 (E.D. Tenn. 1979), *supp. op.*, 474 F. Supp. 525 (E.D. Tenn. 1979), *supp. op.*, 497 F. Supp. 390 (E.D. Tenn. 1980); *Vaughn v. Reed*, 313 F. Supp. 431 (W.D. Va. 1970). Compare *Malnak v. Yogi*, 592 F.2d 197 (3d Cir. 1979) (holding unconstitutional a school course in which students participated in transcendental meditation ceremonies).

⁴ *Schempp*, 374 U.S. at 225; *Graham*, 449 U.S. at 42; *Hall*, 656 F.2d at 1002; *Gibson*, 1 F. Supp. 2d at 1432; *Chandler*, 985 F. Supp. at 1063; *Herdahl*, 933 F. Supp. at 592; *Human*, 725 F. Supp. at 1508; *Crockett*, 568 F. Supp. at 1427; *Wiley*, 497 F. Supp. at 392, 394; *Vaughn*, 313 F. Supp. at 433; *Malnak v. Yogi*, 592 F.2d 197 (3d Cir. 1979) (holding unconstitutional a school course in which students participated in transcendental meditation ceremonies).

⁵ *Wiley*, 497 F. Supp. at 394. See also, *Gibson*, 1 F. Supp.2d at 1433-34; *Herdahl*, 933 F. Supp. at 595.

⁶ *Crockett*, 568 F. Supp. at 1431. See also, *Gibson*, 1 F. Supp.2d at 1433; *Vaughn*, 313 F. Supp. at 434.

⁷ *Herdahl*, 933 F. Supp. at 593-594; *Wiley*, 468 F. Supp. at 152.

⁸ *Wiley*, 468 F. Supp. at 152.

⁹ *Wiley*, 497 F. Supp. at 393.

¹⁰ *Crockett*, 568 F. Supp. at 1431. See also, *Gibson*, 1 F. Supp.2d at 1433; *Herdahl*, 933 F. Supp. at 598-599.

¹¹ *Crockett*, 568 F. Supp. at 1431. See also, *Gibson*, 1 F. Supp.2d at 1433.

¹² *Herdahl*, 933 F. Supp. at 595 & n.9, 600. See also, *Hall*, 656 F.2d at 1002-1003; *Wiley*, 468 F. Supp. at 151; *Chandler*, 985 F. Supp. at 1063.

¹³ *Gibson*, 1 F. Supp.2d at 1434; *Herdahl*, 933 F. Supp. at 596, 600; *Wiley*, 474 F. Supp. at 531.

¹⁴ This consensus statement, as well as guidelines and resources for teaching about religion in public schools, can be found in “Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Education” by Charles C. Haynes and Oliver Thomas.