

Research Brief

Incorporating a Bible Study course into the high school curriculum

Questions:

- What current research might be available that would assist in making a final recommendation
- How does the church/state debate play into a district's final decision

Summary of Findings:

The question of Bible study and moral education in public schools has existed for many years:

Public interest in moral development in American society stems from the 17th century, when the Company of Massachusetts Bay passed an act which ordered every town to appoint a person to teach children to read and write so they could interpret the Bible and defend themselves from false representations of their Protestant faith. Education in the moral domain has continued to be important in the schools, although the Protestant based value system has gradually given way to non-religious democratic values such as freedom, equality, justice, and respect for human rights. (Chapman & Davis, 1977)

Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish parochial schools have always had religious studies as part of their curriculum, but there has been the question about whether public schools can also. "In 1962 two U.S. Supreme Court cases (Abington School District vs. Schempp and Engle vs. Vitale) prohibited the practice of Bible reading in public schools. It was believed that activities such as Bible reading violated individuals' rights of religious belief and expression as protected in the First Amendment. Since 1962 various legal and professional statements have indicated that the study of religions, but not the practice of religions, ought to be an integral part of public school curriculum" (Smith & Bodin, 1979). Although many schools have avoided situations in which they may violate the legal principle of church-state separation, Wilmore (1995) describes how schools have found ways to legally include Christian activities for Christian students:

The passage of the United States Equal Access Act in 1984 allowed religious clubs access to public secondary schools. The "Board of Education of the Westside Community Schools v. Mergens" case of 1990 ruled that high school students could participate in a prayer club at their school with a "limited open

forum." The Mergens case opened the door to many student-led, Bible-club-related activities; however, the debate continues as to what constitutes a limited open forum. The "Mergens" case has also untied the hands of many Christian educators, parents, and students who want to allow Bible studies, clubs, and prayer groups on their campuses. These activities are growing rapidly. The key is that they must be organized and led by students. Two student-led organizations include the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) and Teens United in Faith (TUF) clubs. Elementary students at Gerard Elementary School in Cleburne, Texas, have also formed a Bible club with the strong support of parents, teachers, and their principal. The paper argues that the founding fathers of the United States intended freedom of religion rather than freedom from religion.

Given the diversity of religious beliefs in this country and the principle of separation of church and state, courts are trying to balance individual's interests and rights but "are unlikely to develop unambiguous criteria for delineating the proper distance between church and state" (Epley, 1984). In general, however, "the three tests the Supreme Court had developed in regard to the constitutionality of statutes involving church-state relations are: (1) the statute must have a secular legislative purpose, (2) its principal or primary effect must be one that neither advances nor inhibits religion, and (3) it must not foster an excessive government entanglement with religion" (Hamilton, 1983).

The principal of "study of religion, not practice of religion" would suggest that if the focus of Bible study is Christian-focused religious study, it should be a student-initiated club or organization. If the Bible were to be a curricular study, then it should be either the history and geography of the Bible, or the Bible as literature.

Online Resources:

(Note: ERIC documents can be found by going to <http://www.eric.ed.gov/> and entering the ERIC ID#)

Skills for Ethical Action: A Rationale.

Chapman, Marian L.; Davis, Florence V.;

This paper presents an overview of the philosophical/historical background of moral education in the United States and describes an instructional program developed to teach junior high school students a behavioral strategy for acting ethically. Entitled "Skills for Ethical Action," (SEA), this program was devised in the 1970's to help meet public demand for moral instruction in the public schools.

ERIC #: ED205450

Recent Litigation Concerning Separation of Church and State.

Epley, B. Glen;

This paper reviews First Amendment federal court cases pertaining to religion in schools, suggesting that the findings reveal a judiciary uncertain of where to strike a balance between the interests of the majority and the rights of the minority. The first area discussed is public aid to private schools. The cases covered in this discussion illustrate why courts have had difficulty defining with precision the wall separating church from state in private school aid: children benefit from such aid, but so do religious organizations. The next area covered is prayer and Bible reading in public schools, an

extraordinarily sensitive component of constitutional law on account of the religious diversity and the sense of duty to individual principle inherent in our populace. The third area of litigation discussed is student religious meetings in public school facilities, because this issue is affected by the Equal Access Act (1984). This is followed by a discussion of the regulation of parochial schools, an area characterized by conflict between the compelling state interest in high-quality education for all children and the constitutional rights of those children who attend parochial schools and their parents. The conclusion suggests that jurists are unlikely to develop unambiguous criteria for delineating the proper distance between church and state.

ERIC #:ED260509

The Courts, Religion, and Public Education. Freedom of Conscience and the Lemon Test. The Human Side: How Does All This Affect Kids?

Wilmore, Elaine L.;

Most school districts have cautiously avoided situations in which they may violate the legal principle of church-state separation. This paper describes a few cases in which public schools found ways to legally include Christian activities for

Christian students. The paper argues that the founding fathers of the United States intended freedom of religion rather than freedom from religion.

ERIC #: ED392150

NASSP: Curriculum Report, Vol. 8, No. 5. Research/Ideas/Practice. Religions in the Public Schools Legal and Desirable.

Smith, Lee; Bodin, Wes;

Key aspects of the issue of religion in public schools are reviewed and several innovative programs in specific schools are described. In 1962 two U.S. Supreme Court cases (Abington School District vs. Schempp and Engle vs. Vitale) prohibited the practice of Bible reading in public schools. It was believed that activities such as Bible reading violated individuals' rights of religious belief and expression as protected in the First Amendment. Since 1962 various legal and professional statements have indicated that the study of religions, but not the practice of religions, ought to be an integral part of public school curriculum. Interest in teaching about religions at all levels of public education has grown during the period 1962-79. This interest is illustrated by development of new units and courses by teachers, certification of teachers for religious studies in some states, integration of religious studies into courses such as social studies and history, and existence of curriculum projects about religions in universities and private centers. Emerging curriculum trends emphasize comparative study of religions and examination of the Bible as literature.

ERIC #: ED174522

Religious Speech in Public High Schools.

James, Bernard;

Social Education; v54 n5 p261-63 Sep 1990

Discusses the "Board of Education of the Westside Community Schools v Mergens" case that was recently decided by the U.S. Supreme Court. The Court stated that refusal to allow the student Bible club to meet on school property violated the federal Equal Access Act. Presents the constitutional issues raised and the case's significance.

ERIC #: EJ415728

Creation Science in the Public Schools.

Hamilton, David A.;

This chapter summarizes a number of cases in which the Supreme Court has dealt with the separation of church and state question presented by the First Amendment. These include an Arkansas statute that excluded Darwinian theory from the high school science curriculum. The

Court declared the statute unconstitutional because the exclusion was religiously motivated. Other cases involved school prayer, circumstances under which the Bible could be used as part of the public school curriculum, and certain types of statutory state aid to nonpublic schools. Three cases involving a balanced treatment for creation science and evolution science are summarized.
ERIC #: ED232299

Teaching the Old Testament in English Classes. English Curriculum Study Series.

Ackerman, James S.; And Others

This book contains background information and suggested discussion questions and classroom activities for the teaching of the Old Testament as literature in junior and senior high school English classes. This approach to biblical scholarship attempts to represent the general consensus of those Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish scholars who attempt to understand the development of biblical religion and history within the context of its Near Eastern background. Part one discusses the historical background of the Old Testament while part two provides analyses of the literature of the Old Testament. The notes on each narrative are designed to help the teacher illuminate the biblical text, and the discussion questions are suggestions designed to provoke the students' interest, not to stress a particular religious interpretation.

ERIC #: ED078433

The Bible as Literature.

The recognition that knowledge about the Bible is fundamental to understanding western cultural heritage, as well as allusions in literature, music, the fine arts, news media, and entertainment, guided the development of this elective course of study for senior high school students. Test suggestions, objectives, and lesson plans are provided for each of the eight units: (1) Introduction and Historical Background; (2) The Apocrypha; (3) Biography and History As Literature in the New Testament; (4) The Narrative; (5) Poetry in the Bible; (6) Wisdom Literature; (7) Drama--the Book of Job; and (8) Prophetic Literature of the Bible. Lesson plans within these units include goals, readings, and activities. A bibliography plus lists of audiovisual materials, film strips, and transparencies conclude this guide.

ERIC #: ED049239

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Meaningful Engaged Learning

By Mike Muir, Maine Center for

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