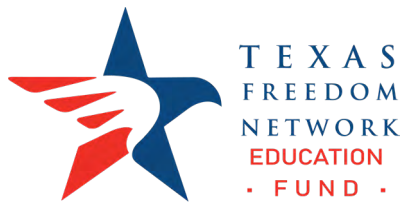


Turning Texas Public Schools into Sunday Schools?

A Review of the State's Proposed K-5 Reading Curriculum

**A Report from the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Learning about the influence of religion, including the Bible, in our history and society can be an important part of a well-rounded education. But public schools must take great care to teach about religion in a balanced and nonconfessional way, respecting the constitutional requirement for church-state separation and the diverse array of religious beliefs of students and their families. The state's new Open Education Resources (OER) curriculum in reading and language arts for Grades K-5 fails this test.

The curriculum's treatment of religion is at times inaccurate, generally lacks religious balance, and too often fails to take the neutral, nonconfessional stance on religion that is necessary for the public school context. The OER instructional materials overwhelmingly favor a Christian perspective and at times verge on a proselytism more appropriate for Sunday Schools than public schools. Moreover, the curriculum's accompanying notifications are not transparent, effectively hiding from parents how extensive, detailed and Christian-centric its lessons are. Such problems raise serious questions about the motivations, agenda and competence of the curriculum's authors.

Examining the OER Curriculum

HB1605, an overhaul of the process for adopting public school instructional materials passed by the Legislature in 2023, authorizes the development of OER materials owned by the state. If approved by the State Board of Education, those state-developed OER curriculum materials in a variety of subject areas will be available for use by any Texas public schools in coming years.

Dr. David R. Brockman, a religious studies scholar and Christian theologian, examined religion-themed lessons in the new OER reading curriculum for the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund. These focus questions guided his review of the materials:

- Is the coverage of religion accurate? Does it accord not only with what members of a given religion believe but also what is accurate historically?
- Is it balanced? Does it give students a sense of the diverse religious environment they will encounter in society?
- Is it nonconfessional? Does it avoid favoring or promoting one religion over others?

Key Findings

Dr. Brockman’s examination of the entire K-5 OER reading curriculum reveals five major findings in addition to numerous inaccuracies woven throughout the curriculum:

1. The curriculum substantially overemphasizes Christianity throughout its lessons, offering very limited coverage or none at all of other major religions and faith traditions. This finding contradicts claims found in the curriculum’s Program and Implementation Guide and voiced by state education officials. The curriculum gives students the impression that Christianity is more important and more worthy of attention than other religions—an impression a public school has no business conveying.
2. One-sided portrayals of Christianity and its impact whitewash difficult historical truths. While accurately pointing to the role of some Christian leaders in opposing slavery and racial segregation, for example, the curriculum ignores the ways Christianity was used to justify both. History is replete with examples of those who misuse faith to justify terrible things. A public school classroom should educate students about the past, in an age-appropriate way, so that they understand the lessons of history. Whitewashing the past fails to educate and raises concerns about the motivations of the authors.
3. Lessons subtly portray Christian faith claims as straightforwardly true, opening the curriculum to the charge that it is meant to proselytize students. This is especially apparent in lessons about Jesus and early Christianity. It is difficult to see how non-Christian parents could be untroubled by the prospect of their students learning about the purported miracles and resurrection of Jesus. It is equally difficult to see how teachers who are not Christians or are Christians who do not believe the Bible is historically accurate in all respects would be comfortable presenting these and other accounts to their young students.
4. The curriculum’s authors work extensive and detailed Bible lessons into the curriculum even when they are both unnecessary and unwarranted. So lessons about the influence of religion on art, for example, suddenly morph into detailed Bible readings about the creation story and the Last Supper. Moreover, the lessons are worded in ways that will likely confuse young students about whether they are reading actual history or faith claims. Indeed, some of the lessons verge on Bible study and in some cases cross the line into religious instruction.
5. Though religious freedom is vital to American democracy, the curriculum distorts its role in the history of the nation’s founding and underplays the importance of other fundamental liberties cherished by Americans. Students may well come away with the mistaken impression that religious freedom is more important than other liberties (such as freedom of speech or press) and that it was the primary motivation for the English colonization of the Atlantic seaboard as well as a major cause of the American Revolution. This near-obsessive focus—sometimes at the price of accuracy—opens the developers to the charge that they are more interested in promoting an agenda than educating students.

Misleading Parents

The problems highlighted in these key findings are made worse by a lack of transparency and, in some cases, misleading statements in the curriculum’s supporting materials. The Program and Implementation Guide, for example, misleads readers about the lack of substantive diversity of religious content in the curriculum’s lessons. Moreover, the “family support letters” fail to notify parents and guardians just how extensive and detailed the curriculum’s Bible readings and Christian faith claims are. This lack of transparency undermines the right of families to guide the religious instruction of their children.

Conclusion

A thorough examination of the state’s OER reading curriculum for Kindergarten through Grade 5 reveals many problems with its Bible and religion-themed lessons. Many of those lessons are far more appropriate in a Sunday School setting than in public schools that are called upon to serve students and families from a variety of faith traditions or none at all. In the move toward open education resources, Texas officials have an opportunity to give students the accurate, balanced, nonconfessional coverage of religion they need to function and prosper in an increasingly diverse state and nation. This curriculum fails to do so.

It is ironic how a curriculum that repeatedly portrays religious freedom as central to the nation’s founding itself undermines the religious freedom of families whose children would be forced to study detailed Bible lessons regardless of their religious beliefs. It is equally remarkable that at a time when some political leaders have made transparency and parental rights in public education a key talking point, the curriculum’s supporting materials mislead parents about the extent and nature of its religious content.

While relatively minor tweaks of phrasing might remedy some problems identified in this report, problems of religious balance and neutrality are extensive throughout. Substantial revision is required for this curriculum to be appropriate for students in Texas public schools.