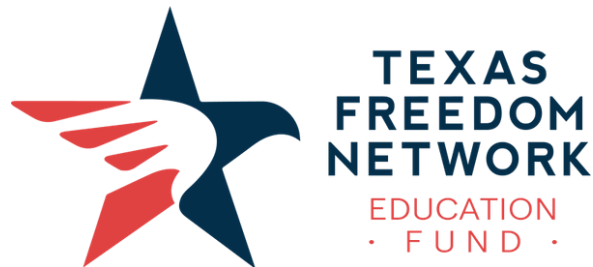


# **Turning Texas Public Schools into Sunday Schools?**

**An Update on the State's Revisions to Its  
Proposed K-5 Reading Curriculum**

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

**November 2024**



## 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. However, public schools must take great care in teaching 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, even after the Texas Education Agency (TEA) updated the materials following the September 2024 Texas State Board of Education (SBOE) Meeting.

Updates to the curriculum called “Bluebonnet Learning,” released by TEA in October 2024, reflect the great value of citizen and activist review and comment. The materials do feature some changes based on the many criticisms made by religious scholars, members of diverse faiths, education experts, and community members during public comment and to individual Board members.

Yet, the updates still fall short of making this curriculum appropriate for the diverse students and faith traditions served by Texas public schools. While the authors of Bluebonnet Learning have clearly worked to rectify numerous problems in the May 2024 version identified by [Texas Freedom Network Education Fund’s August report](#) and other members of the public, many of those problems are systemic—especially the curriculum’s “Bible-infused” character and resulting religious imbalance—and require a thorough overhaul rather than piecemeal revision.

The curriculum’s treatment of religion is still 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 continue to 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 and its advisory board.

## Examining the OER Curriculum

HB 1605, an overhaul of the process for adopting public school instructional materials passed by the Legislature in 2023, created the review and approval process for OER materials developed and 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 in August 2024. Dr. Brockman again examined the instructional materials in October 2024, after TEA released an updated version of the curriculum. During both examinations of the materials, these focus questions guided his review:

- Is the coverage of religion accurate? Does it accord not only with what members of a given religion believe but also with 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 updated examination of the K-5 OER reading curriculum reveals five major findings in addition to numerous inaccuracies woven throughout the curriculum:

1. **The curriculum overemphasizes Christianity, offering very limited coverage of other major religions and faith traditions.** The widespread description of the May 2024 curriculum as “Bible-infused” applies to the Bluebonnet Learning update as well. Of the world’s major religions, only Christianity and Judaism receive any substantial coverage, and coverage of Judaism is still largely restricted to the biblical period. While brief mentions of religions other than Christianity are an important improvement, they do not resolve the overall religious imbalance—and “Bible-infused” slant—of this curriculum.

2. **One-sided portrayals of Christianity and its impact continue to whitewash difficult historical truths, despite some improvements.** The Bluebonnet Learning curriculum made no substantive changes in the May 2024 version’s consistent whitewashing of European colonization and conflicting Christian perspectives in the divisions over slavery.
3. **The curriculum continues to be open to the charge that it is meant to proselytize students.** While the Bluebonnet Learning authors have taken steps to reduce the proselytizing tendencies of the May 2024 version, the revised version’s coverage of the life of Jesus and the rise of Christianity still far outweighs coverage of any other living religious traditions, including Judaism. The clear implication is that Christianity is more important and deserves more attention than other religions—a message public schools have no business conveying.
4. **The authors appear to go out of their way to work detailed Bible lessons into the curriculum even when they are both unnecessary and unwarranted.** Though the Bluebonnet Learning version offers some improvements over the May 2024 version, it remains open to the charge that its treatment of biblical passages is more appropriate to Sunday School than public schools.
5. **Though religious freedom is vital to American democracy, the curriculum still distorts its role in the nation’s founding while underplaying the importance of other fundamental liberties cherished by Americans.** The Bluebonnet Learning materials continue to imply inaccurately that religious freedom was the primary reason for colonization and is the most important of our fundamental liberties.

## Misleading Parents

Even with updates to the curriculum, the problems highlighted in these key findings continue to be made worse by a lack of transparency in the curriculum’s supporting materials. The initial analysis of the curriculum found that 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. Marginal improvements have not rectified the problem.

## Conclusion

Even after taking into account public comments and expert analysis, Bluebonnet Learning's updated OER reading curriculum for Kindergarten through Grade 5 remains focused on pushing Bible-infused lessons rather than creating quality reading materials for our students in Texas public schools. Just as the [Texas Freedom Network Education Fund's August report](#) found, these lessons persist in being far more appropriate for Sunday Schools than public schools.

Our neighborhood public schools 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, even with some updates directly taken from our previous report's recommendations, fails to teach Texas students the truth or provide them with the accurate, honest, and unbiased education they need to build a better future.

This curriculum continues to violate the religious freedom of Texas students and their families, forcing unnecessary Bible instruction on students in our public schools who practice a diverse array of faiths and no faith at all. A major lack of transparency and disregard for parental rights also continues to mar this curriculum, with supporting materials concealing the Christian-centric nature of these lessons from parents and guardians. Even more insidious, [Education Commissioner Mike Morath chose to stack the curriculum's advisory board with political operatives like Ben Carson and still refuses to release the board's recommendations for the curriculum.](#)

Public schools are not Sunday Schools, yet this curriculum continues to signify flagrant attempts to push a one-sided religious agenda in Texas public education.