

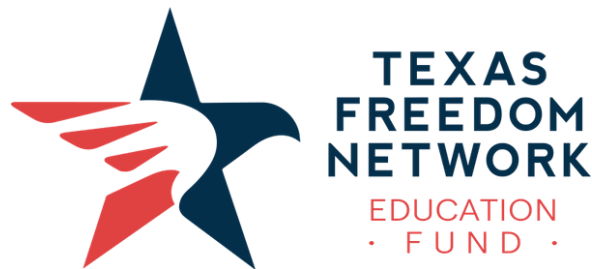
# **Turning Texas Public Schools into Sunday Schools?**

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

**Analysis from the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund**

**November 2024**

Prepared by David R. Brockman, Ph.D.



# Comments on the Bluebonnet Learning K–5 Reading Language Arts Materials

Prepared by David R. Brockman, Ph.D.  
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At the request of the Texas Freedom Network (TFN), I examined the new Bluebonnet Learning K–5 Reading Language Arts, Edition 1 materials (hereafter called “BB”), to determine whether and how they addressed concerns raised about the May 2024 version in my TFN report published in August 2024. This report discusses my findings.

To summarize, there is some good news and some bad news.

The good news: The new BB materials highlight the great value of citizen and activist review and comment—indeed, pushback—on the May 2024 open resource curriculum. The BB materials do take account of many of the criticisms lodged against the May version. Indeed, some changes appear to have been made in response to our TFN report. The most obvious example: In Grade 3, where the May 2024 draft said “many heard about the resurrection of Jesus,” BB says instead, “many heard *believers’ stories* about the resurrection of Jesus,” the very wording suggested in the TFN report (emphasis mine).

As for the bad news: I cannot recommend the BB materials in their current form for use in Texas public schools. While the authors of BB have clearly worked to rectify numerous problems in the May 2024 version identified by TFN 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 BB version still verges on Christian proselytism insofar as its extensive, lopsided coverage of Christianity and the Bible suggests that this is the only religious tradition of any importance. That is not a message that Texas public schools, which are called to serve a religiously diverse population, have any business conveying.

The findings mentioned in the headings below refer to those in the August TFN report. I have changed each finding/heading to reflect my evaluation of the BB materials. After each heading, I discuss continuing problems and

improvements in the BB curriculum and summarize the new situation (“bottom line”) with regard to the BB version.

**FINDING 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 BB 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. As with the May 2024 version, students using the BB curriculum learn a *whole lot* about Christianity and the Bible—about the biblical Creation and Flood stories, the wisdom of King Solomon, Daniel in the Lion’s Den, the life and miracles of Jesus, the Last Supper, the apostle Paul. Other religions get far less coverage.

However, the authors have taken small steps toward the inclusion of other contemporary religions. BB now includes brief mentions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, whereas the May 2024 version contained none.

**Here are specific improvements:**

- Kindergarten, Unit 7: BB adds a table showing equivalents of the Golden Rule in religions other than Judaism and Christianity—specifically, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism.
- Added mentions of Judaism:
  - Grade 3, Unit 4: BB adds information about biblical Judaism.<sup>i</sup>
  - Grade 3, Unit 4: BB notes that the Hebrew Bible is subject to many different interpretations, as are all religious texts.<sup>ii</sup>
  - Grade 5, Unit 7: BB adds a brief note about Jewish belief.<sup>iii</sup>
- Additional mentions of Islam:
  - BB gives the teacher brief background information about Islam in the lesson on Mansa Musa.<sup>iv</sup>
  - BB adds a brief reference to Islam to the Creation art appreciation lesson.<sup>v</sup>
  - BB adds basic overview information about Islam to the “Islamic Civilization” sidebar.<sup>vi</sup>

- BB adds a brief mention about discussion of King David in the Qur'an.<sup>vii</sup>
- New mention of Hinduism:
  - BB adds a reference to the Hindu scripture the Bhagavad Gita, in connection with physicist Robert Oppenheimer's comment regarding the atom bomb, "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds."<sup>viii</sup>
- New mention of Buddhism:
  - BB adds a brief mention of Buddhism in connection with sherpas who guide expeditions to Mount Everest but without any discussion of Buddhist beliefs.<sup>ix</sup>

Furthermore, where the May 2024 Grade 5 unit on poetry began with a lesson on Psalm 23—thus implicitly giving that religious text primacy over other poetry examples—BB moves the Psalm 23 discussion to Lesson 5.

**Bottom line:** While BB's 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.

## **FINDING 2: One-sided portrayals of Christianity and its impact continue to whitewash difficult historical truths, despite some improvements.**

As the TFN report indicated, "the [May 2024] curriculum...consistently downplays...the well-documented history of Christians' involvement in injustice and oppression." The BB curriculum is more of a mixed bag on this issue.

On the negative side, the BB curriculum makes no substantive changes in the May 2024 version's consistent soft-pedaling of European attempts to convert the Native American peoples to Christianity. Like the May version, BB continues to use deceptively mild terms such as "share," "introduce," and "teach" for these efforts rather than the more accurate "attempt to convert."<sup>x</sup> Also, the BB Grade 5 curriculum, like that of May 2024, still places Christianity wholly on the side of the pre-Civil War abolitionist movement, saying that Lincoln and other abolitionists "relied on a deep Christian faith" but failing to

mention that Southern defenders of slavery also justified that barbarous institution on biblical and Christian grounds.<sup>xi</sup>

On the positive side, BB does move toward a more historically accurate portrayal in two instances. First, BB's Grade 4 discussion of the Crusades now notes Christian Crusader violence against non-Christians: "On their way to the holy city, crusaders sometimes killed Muslims and Jews."<sup>xii</sup> Second, unlike the May 2024 version, BB does not place Christianity wholly on the side of the Civil Rights struggle; it notes correctly that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter to Birmingham Jail" was addressed to Christian clergy who supported segregation.<sup>xiii</sup>

**Bottom line:** The severity of this problem has been lessened in the BB curriculum, but the whitewashing of European colonization and Christian involvement in American slavery persists in BB.

### **FINDING 3: The curriculum continues to be open to the charge that it is meant to proselytize students.**

The situation with regard to this finding is more complicated. The BB version features some noteworthy improvements in the Grade 3 unit on ancient Rome, which was highly tendentious and verged on proselytism in the May 2024 version. The BB authors have taken steps to reduce the proselytizing effects of the original version. However, problems persist.

#### **Here are the continuing problems in the BB version:**

- The coverage of the life of Jesus and the rise of Christianity in this BB unit continues to be far lengthier and more detailed than the coverage of any other living religious tradition (contributing to the religious imbalance noted in Finding 1).
- The BB Family Support Letter still does not warn parents of the substantial Christian content.
- The BB curriculum still claims, inaccurately, that polytheistic Rome and Christian Rome were "two completely different cultures."<sup>xiv</sup>
- BB makes no substantial changes in the sharp contrast drawn in the May 2024 version between the "mythical" (and thus "completely fictional") Roman deities and the Christian God.<sup>xv</sup>

- BB still makes the triumphalist and historically inaccurate claim that with the rise of Christianity Rome’s polytheistic “religious beliefs were completely upended” and that “Rome would never be the same.”<sup>xvi</sup>

**Here are some noteworthy improvements in the BB version:**

- BB corrects the May 2024 mischaracterization of the Jewish concept of the Messiah (changing from the tendentiously Christian “Savior sent by God” to the more accurate “an anointed or chosen one set apart for a special purpose”).<sup>xvii</sup>
- The BB account of the annunciation is more neutral.<sup>xviii</sup>
- BB significantly reduces discussion of Jesus’ miracles.<sup>xix</sup> BB also partially corrects the May 2024 inaccuracy about the significance of Jesus’s miracles to contemporary Christians.<sup>xx</sup>
- BB provides a more neutral account of the resurrection stories. Where the May 2024 version said “many heard about the resurrection of Jesus,” BB says instead, “many heard *believers’ stories* about the resurrection of Jesus”—the very wording suggested in the TFN report.<sup>xxi</sup>
- BB corrects the May 2024 version’s erroneous (and tendentiously Protestant) characterization of how Christianity differed from ancient Roman religion.<sup>xxii</sup>

**Bottom line:** While the BB 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.

**FINDING 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.**

The TFN report noted that the authors of the May 2024 version “frequently introduce in-depth study of biblical content with little justification. And they often do so without notifying parents that their children will be doing what at

minimum verges on Bible study more suited to Christian Sunday School than nonsectarian public schools.”

Once again, the picture with regard to BB is mixed: some improvements, though the overall problem remains, as the two lessons highlighted in the TFN report indicate.

The Kindergarten art appreciation unit in BB still includes lengthy quotes from and discussions of the Genesis creation and flood stories, and still includes the “Sequencing Activity” asking students to identify the order of creation—material far more appropriate to Sunday School than public schools.<sup>xxiii</sup> On the plus side, however, the Family Support Letter for this unit in BB now informs parents that students will be studying the biblical book of Genesis, though it does not warn parents about the extent and nature of that study.

The Grade 5 lesson on Leonardo’s *The Last Supper* continues to be more suitable for Sunday School, as it makes no substantial changes to this lesson from May 2024. BB still contains the lengthy quote from the Gospel of Matthew and features far more detailed discussion about the events of the Last Supper than is pedagogically necessary for student understanding of the artwork.

However, there are a few welcome improvements to this lesson. First, the BB version removes wording that strongly suggests the events related to the gospel account are historically accurate. Whereas the May 2024 version said “Let’s read the story in the book of Matthew to see for ourselves what unfolded during the supper,” the BB version has the more neutral “The Bible explains that Jesus knew that after this meal, he would be arrested, put on trial, and killed. He predicted his betrayal during the supper.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

The BB version also removes some highly tendentious—even preachy—language regarding the significance of Jesus’s sacrifice in the May 2024 version and replaces it with more neutral, less theological language (see next page).

May 2024 version	Bluebonnet version <sup>xxv</sup>
<p>“In the biblical narrative, Jesus gave his disciples hints that he would die. <i>Jesus did not leave his disciples without hope, though.</i> He also foreshadowed his resurrection, when he was raised from the dead.” [emphasis mine]</p>	<p>In the biblical narrative, Jesus gave his disciples hints that he would die[.] He also foreshadowed his resurrection, when he was raised from the dead.”</p>
<p>This scene [the Last Supper] was chosen by Leonardo because of its importance to the Christian practice of communion. <i>Specifically, Jesus wanted his followers to understand that in the same way that the body is sustained by bread, the soul is sustained by faith in Jesus. He also wanted his followers to break the bread to remember his physical death and drink the fruit of the vine to remember that his blood was shed as the last sacrifice that would be needed to live in connection with God. When followers of Jesus participate in communion, they do what Jesus did at the Last Supper as a way to honor and remember that sacrifice.</i>” [emphasis mine]</p>	<p>Most Christians of Leonardo’s time and today regularly practice communion, breaking bread, and drinking of the fruit of the vine in the same way Jesus led his disciples during the Last Supper. <i>The ceremony is central to Christian belief that the blood of Jesus was shed as the last sacrifice that would be needed to live in connection with God. A painting about the story of the ceremony’s origin would be widely recognized by Leonardo’s audience.</i>” [emphasis mine]</p>

**Bottom line:** Though the BB 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.



**FINDING 5: Though religious freedom is vital to American democracy, the curriculum distorts its role in the nation’s founding while underplaying the importance of other fundamental liberties cherished by Americans.**

BB continues to overemphasize religious freedom at the expense of other fundamental liberties Americans cherish. Though there have been some minor improvements from the May 2024 version, the TFN report still applies: “The near-obsessive focus on religious freedom in this curriculum—sometimes at the price of accuracy—opens the developers to the charge that they are more interested in promoting an agenda than educating students.”

The BB Kindergarten unit on America makes no substantial improvement in the May 2024 version’s obsessive emphasis on religious liberty over other freedoms. For example, where the May version gave as the only example of freedom “the freedom to practice the religion you believe in,” BB says instead: “You have several liberties as an American. One is the freedom to practice the religion you believe in. Another is the freedom to talk about your beliefs.”<sup>xxvi</sup> While that last sentence could refer to freedom of speech, that phrasing could just as easily refer to religious freedom (as opposed to something like “the freedom to speak your mind”).

In Grade 1, BB still erroneously implies that a perceived threat to religious liberty was a main grievance the colonists had against the British government.<sup>xxvii</sup>

In Grade 2, Unit 10 (“Fighting for a Cause”), BB still overemphasizes religious freedom over other liberties. As in the May 2024 version, this unit mentions religious freedom at least a dozen times. However, BB does partially correct an error in the May 2024 version regarding religious freedom and the motives of the Founders. The May version contained the gross overgeneralization that the U.S. “was founded by people who wanted religious freedom” and that “*These early founders* of our country wanted to make sure that here in America, everyone had the freedom to worship as they believed without the government telling us how” (emphasis mine). BB changes the first passage to “it was founded by *many* people who wanted religious freedom,” which fails

to clear up the problem. However, BB changes the second italicized passage to the more accurate “*Many of these early founders*” (emphasis mine).<sup>xxviii</sup>

In Grade 5, BB still one-sidedly associates abolitionism with Christianity, glossing over the fact that Southern defenses of slavery were often based on biblical teachings. However, in the discussion of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” BB does add a note acknowledging that Christian clergy were among those who supported segregation.<sup>xxix</sup>

**Bottom line:** BB continues to distort the role of religious freedom in American history.

## Misleading Passages, Inaccuracies and Errors

BB corrects most, but not all, of the errors or inaccuracies specifically mentioned in the TFN report.

In Kindergarten, Unit 6, BB corrects erroneous comments about religious dissenters in Great Britain being uniformly jailed.<sup>xxx</sup>

In Grade 1, Unit 8, BB corrects errors about religious freedom being a universal motive for colonization and about baptism being a sign of religious freedom.  
<sup>xxxi</sup>

In Grade 2, Unit 9, BB corrects erroneous claim that religious freedom was the main motive for English colonization of North America.<sup>xxxii</sup>

In Grade 3, Unit 4, BB removes the erroneous claim that early Christians worshiped in catacombs. It also corrects the erroneous statement that Constantine made Christianity “the national religion” of the Roman Empire; instead, BB accurately states that Constantine “legalized Christianity in Rome and began providing formal government support for the religion.”<sup>xxxiii</sup>

In Grade 4, Unit 4, BB does **not** correct the error about the Pope being head of “the Christian Church” and **still** inaccurately speaks of people “joining” the Catholic Church.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

However, in the same Grade 4 unit, BB does appear to follow TFN’s guidance with regard to the May version’s inaccurate and anti-Muslim depiction of the Crusades. Whereas that earlier version erroneously claimed that Muslim Turks

“closed” Jerusalem to Christians, BB gives a more nuanced picture: “Over time, Arab armies were conquered by Turkish armies, and access to Jerusalem became harder for Jewish and Christian pilgrims.” Also, whereas the May version strongly implied that Muslims were responsible for the violence of the Crusade, BB notes, quite accurately, that “On their way to the holy city, crusaders sometimes killed Muslims and Jews.” <sup>xxxv</sup>

In Grade 5, Unit 3, BB corrects an inaccuracy about when religions developed. Whereas the May version erroneously claimed that people “began practicing religions” between 4000 and 2000 BCE, BB correctly notes that during this period “Religious practices became more organized [sic].”