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Commentary: Why is the Camp Verde School Board heading on biblical collision course?



Dianne Post is the legal director for Secular Communities for Arizona.

Dianne Post: MY TURN

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Three Verde Valley residents with no church and no children in the Camp Verde School District instigated the Camp Verde School Board to vote 4-0 on Dec. 12, 2019, to adopt the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools (NCBCPS) for potential implementation in the 2020/2021 school year.

Based on expert opinion and federal court cases in Tennessee, Mississippi, Texas, and one ongoing in West Virginia, we tried to dissuade the board from this course of action to no avail.

Arizona law, A.R.S. §15-717.01, does allow concepts from the Old and New Testament to be included in history or English or both. Any elective course may pertain to how the Bible has influenced western culture for pupils in grades 9 through 12. It shall not teach Bible studies.

Section D of the statute requires “Before a school offers a course under this section, a legal review shall be conducted to ensure that the course complies with the 1st Amendment to the United States Constitution.” We have requested to be on that legal review team but have received no response.

Any such course must, as outlined in Section F of the statute, follow applicable law and all federal and state guidelines in maintaining religious neutrality and accommodating the diverse religious or nonreligious views, traditions and perspectives of pupils.

Under Section G of the statute, students may not be required to use a specific translation of the old or new testament since there are dozens of different versions, all with different stories, thus limiting its utility.

Mark Chancey, professor of Religious Studies at Southern Methodist University in Dallas is a biblical scholar whose research focuses on how public schools teach about the Bible.

He said, “The courts have made clear that it is acceptable for public schools to teach about the Bible for the sake of cultural literacy, but they’ve also made clear that the teaching 1) has to be done from an academic perspective that 2) doesn’t privilege particular religious viewpoints.

The NCBCPS’s materials fall short on both counts. Its academic quality is extremely low, and edition after edition of its curriculum has been riddled with factual errors.

Some of the National Council’s claims sound like the National Enquirer, like the report in some editions that NASA discovered a missing day in time that corresponds to the

biblical story of the sun standing still -- an urban legend.

The curriculum was not put together by scholars or educators; it was literally cut and pasted together from non-academic sources, many of them right off the Internet.

Further, its creators produced its curriculum from the start to promote their own religious beliefs. The curriculum assumes an inerrantist perspective, the belief held by some (not all) theologically conservative Protestants but rejected by other Christians that the Bible has no historical or scientific errors.

It repeats historical errors and uses fake quotations to promote Christian nationalism, the mistaken belief that the American system of law and government is based primarily on the Bible.

The NCBCPS also claims not to have ever been challenged in court, but this is inaccurate. In 1998, a federal court prohibited a school district from teaching the New Testament portion of the curriculum and only allowed the teaching of the Old Testament portion after it had been substantially revised by local teachers.

In 2008, the Ector County School District in Texas decided to drop the curriculum rather than defend it in court. The problems and errors of the NCBCPS are well documented, and all it takes is a Google search to learn about them in more detail.

I suppose it's possible that a good teacher could work miracles with bad material, but in light of the council's troubling track record, I would encourage any school district to look elsewhere for their course materials."

Rev. Charles Foster Johnson, Founder and Executive Director, Pastors for Texas Children also opposes this course of action. "As a Baptist minister who treasures the Bible as a cornerstone of my faith, I know that classes focused on Scripture belong in our houses of worship, not in our religiously diverse public schools. Public schools can and do study religion as an academic subject, impartially discussing the impact that religion has had on culture and history. But classes that focus exclusively on the Bible risk threatening our nation's treasured constitutional promise of religious liberty and church-state separation. Furthermore, recent polling shows that 'only about 1 in 8 Americans believe that school districts should offer classes only on the Bible'. Public schools have no business promoting one faith over another. Let's leave religious instruction to our religious leaders."

Annie McMahon has been a parent and substitute teacher in the Verde Valley for over 30 years. She says, "I am concerned that the Camp Verde School District is planning to

introduce Bible study into the school curricula. As one who greatly values the basis of the rights established in the Constitution of the United States, I take issue with the encroachment of religion into the public school system. This is a clear violation of the 1st Amendment. Without clear separation of Church and State, our civil liberties become obscured. I choose to indoctrinate no child with the belief system of those who would wish to control our freedom of thought. The Bible is not based on fact, but on ideology, and it is ideology we must curtail to maintain our freedom. This is the very standard on which this great country was inaugurated.”

If the school is concerned about character building, there are far better vehicles. For example, the Golden Rule Club that focuses on empathy, kindness, respect, and civility. It's an excellent program and also free. <https://goldenruleeducation.org> But the focus on the Bible, using the NCBCPS curricula, is seriously misguided and needs to be reconsidered.

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