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The Bible in State Academic Standards

Introduction

A summary of state academic standards indicating where educators can and, in some cases, are expected to teach about the influence of the Bible and Christianity.



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Executive Summary

There is a common misconception that teaching about various world religions may be acceptable for cultural awareness, but teaching about the Bible and Christianity is not allowed because of concerns over the establishment of religion. However, as *The Bible in State Academic Standards* shows, state academic standards across the nation provide ample opportunity for educators to teach about the Bible, Christian beliefs, and Christians who were influential in history.

We have compiled this report to help educators and the public understand that teaching about the Bible and Christianity has not been banned from public education. In fact, teaching about these topics is expected in more instances than most people might believe. By bringing these standards to light, we hope that educators will gain confidence to exercise their academic freedom to teach to the full extent of their state's standards.

Some states have very detailed standards that include Bible stories as well as Jewish and Christian beliefs. All states have generalized standards with references such as "religion," "culture," or "beliefs." Academic standards also include patriotic and civics lessons that allow for appropriate references to America's Judeo-Christian heritage.

The Common Core English/Language Arts standards reference the Bible four times, and we have included those references in the states that have adopted them.

We have also included the preambles to state constitutions that reference God because most states have an expectation that students will learn about their constitutions. Where applicable, we have included state laws that involve religious expression. For example, thirty-four states have laws that either mandate or allow for the school day to begin with a moment of silence that can be used for prayer.

Gateways to Better Education is a nonprofit organization working to help public schools become places where students feel the freedom to express their faith and where they gain an academic appreciation for the Bible and Christianity across the whole curriculum as it relates to history, culture, and values. We equip teachers and school administrators with ways to do this legally and appropriately, and we help parents navigate the public schools so their children graduate with their faith and values intact.

It is our desire that this report will prompt a discussion among educators, parents, and school officials about the need to overcome self-censorship and timidity in teaching about the Bible and Christianity as related to history, culture, and values.

Eric Buehrer
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* This report was published in 2021. The completion date of the research for each state is ongoing and indicated at the bottom of each state's summary. Because states routinely revise or adopt new standards, visit the department of education for your state to verify your states' academic standards.

The Bible in State Academic Standards

A summary of state academic standards indicating where educators can and, in some cases, are expected to teach about the influence of the Bible and Christianity.

By Eric Buehrer

There is a common misconception that teaching about various world religions may be acceptable for cultural awareness, but teaching about the Bible and Christianity is not allowed because of concerns over the establishment of religion. As *The Bible in State Academic Standards* shows, quite to the contrary, state academic standards across the nation provide ample opportunity for educators to teach about the Bible, Christian beliefs, and Christians who were influential in history.

We have compiled this report to help educators and the public understand that teaching about the Bible and Christianity has not been banned from public education. In fact, teaching about these topics is expected in more instances than most people might believe. By bringing these standards to light, we hope that educators will gain confidence to exercise their academic freedom to teach to the full extent of their state's standards.

Detailed Standards

Some states provide educators with detailed standards for what students should learn about the Bible and Christianity. For example, in **California**, sixth grade students are expected to:

“Note the origins of Christianity in the Jewish Messianic prophecies, the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth as described in the New Testament, and the contribution of St. Paul the Apostle to the definition and spread of Christian beliefs (e.g., belief in the Trinity, resurrection, salvation).”

In **Massachusetts**, sixth grade students are expected to learn:

“the central features of Christianity (e.g., the belief in a messiah who could redeem humans from sin, the concept of salvation, the belief in an Old and a new Testament in the Bible, the life and teachings of Jesus.)”

In **Virginia**, high school students are expected to:

“[A]pply social science skills to understand the ancient river valley civilizations, including ...the Hebrews and [by]...describing the origins, beliefs, traditions, customs, and spread of Judaism. Essential Knowledge: Beliefs, traditions, and customs of Judaism: ▪ Belief in one God (monotheism) ▪ Torah, which contains the written records and beliefs of the Jews ▪ Ten Commandments, which state moral and religious conduct ▪ Covenant”

However, even though a state's academic standard provides educators with specific guidelines for teaching these topics, educators are too often uninformed about the specific standard (opting to teach only what is in the textbook) or are afraid to give the topic much time or attention for fear of being accused of endorsing a particular religious belief.

Some states include Christianity and Judaism in a list of major world religions students should study. For example, **Maryland** expects students to:

“Describe the social, political and economic impacts of various world religions on a global society, such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism.”

Unfortunately, due to a mixture of multicultural fervor and fear of mixing church and state, some educators only feel comfortable teaching about religions *other* than Christianity. Consequently, in the multicultural mix, the Bible and Christianity are given a disproportionately small amount of class time.

Generalized References

Some states include generalized references such as “beliefs,” “culture,” or “social institutions.” In these cases it would be very appropriate to teach about specific beliefs of Christianity in order to fulfill the standards adequately. For example, in **New Jersey**, by the end of twelfth grade, students are expected to:

“Evaluate the role of religion on cultural and social mores, public opinion, and political decisions.”

Certainly understanding the beliefs that motivated Christians in American history and culture is important to adequately fulfilling this standards.

A **New Hampshire** standard for high school students adds examples of the influence of religion on American history and culture:

“Analyze how religious ideas of morality have impacted social change, e. g., the Abolitionist Movement or the debate over legalized abortion.”

“Religious ideas” in the context of this standard means Christian ideas and educators need not be hesitant to teach about them. To fulfill a standard like this, educators should teach — as the standard requires — the religious ideas of Christians involved in these social movements.

Christians in History

State academic standards across the country also expect students to learn about people in history who were motivated by their Christian faith. For example, **New York** expects high school students to:

“Analyze the development of American culture, explaining how ideas, values, beliefs, and traditions have changed over time and how they unite all Americans...[for example] read Dr. Martin Luther King’s ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail’ and discuss how this letter expresses the basic ideas, values, and beliefs found in the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights.

In his *I Have a Dream* speech, King quoted Isaiah 40 when he declared:

“I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain will be made low. The rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.”

In his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, he defended himself by recalling the civil disobedience of the three Hebrew youth in defying Nebuchadnezzar’s order to bow to him. He also referred to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross as his inspiration. And, he stated that “a just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God.”

To properly understand King’s motivation and reasoning, students need to understand how his Christian faith shaped his ideas and actions.

As another example of learning about Christians who were motivated by their faith, **California** high school students studying American history are expected to “analyze the similarities and differences between the ideologies of Social Darwinism and Social Gospel (e.g., using biographies of William Graham Sumner, Bill Sunday, Dwight L. Moody).”

Pennsylvania’s academic standard for sixth grade expects students to:

“Identify and explain how individuals and groups made significant political and cultural contributions to world history.” It includes as examples: “Pope Leo X, John Calvin, John Wesley, Martin Luther, Ignatius of Loyola”

Holidays

State standards also include an understanding of holidays that have religious significance. For example, **Arizona** kindergarteners are to “explain and explore origins of key American symbols, traditions and holidays...Key holidays include...Thanksgiving...” This should include the President’s annual request that the nation use the day to thank God for his blessings.

Texas expects elementary students to:

“[E]xplain the significance of religious holidays and observances such as Christmas, Easter, Ramadan, annual hajj, Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, Diwali, and Vaisakhi in various contemporary societies.”

Reading the Bible to learn about Christmas, Easter, Yom Kippur, and Rosh Hashanah is a legitimate academic approach to teaching students about these holidays. As we explain under “State Laws” (p. 6) and “Legal Concerns” (p.8), reading religious texts to fulfill an academic goal is perfectly legal.

In **Minnesota**, second graders are expected to “describe how the culture of a community reflects the history, daily life or beliefs of its people. *For example*: Elements of culture—foods, folk stories, legends, art, music, dance, holidays...”

One way for students to learn about the culture of their community is for teachers to ask parents to share with the class how their family celebrates religious holidays.

Patriotic and Civics Lessons

State standards commonly include expectations that students will learn what the Pledge of Allegiance means. Many educators do not do this. However, doing so would provide students with a solid civics lesson on key aspects of American culture and values.

Teachers can easily help students understand the phrase “one nation under God” as a reflection of one of America’s core values as expressed in the Declaration of Independence, that our rights ultimately come from God and not the government.

Other aspects of American culture include patriotic songs that reference God. For example, the **District of Columbia** expects students to:

“Recite the Pledge of Allegiance and national songs (e.g., “America the Beautiful,” “My Country, ’tis of Thee,” “God Bless America,” “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” and “The Star-Spangled Banner”) and explain the general ideas expressed in the lyrics.”

States also expect students to learn civics lessons that include references to America’s Judeo-Christian roots. For example, **Florida** expects fifth grade students to:

“Explain the definition and origin of rights. Examples are John Locke's ‘state of nature’ philosophy, natural rights: rights to life, liberty...”

As an example of John Locke’s biblical thinking, in the late 17th century he wrote:

“The state of Nature has a law of Nature to govern it, which obliges every one, and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions; for men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent and infinitely wise Maker; all the servants of one sovereign Master, sent into the world by His order and about His business; they are His property, whose workmanship they are made to last during His, not one another's pleasure.”

Learning about State Constitution Preambles

Academic standards also include civics lessons about their state’s constitution. The majority of state constitutions reference God. For example, **Pennsylvania** third graders are expected to:

“Explain the meaning of a preamble. Constitution of the United States, Pennsylvania Constitution.”

The preamble to Pennsylvania’s Constitution reads as follows:

“WE, the people of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, grateful to Almighty God for the blessings of civil and religious liberty, and humbly invoking His guidance, do ordain and establish this Constitution.”

As a civics lesson, students should compare their state constitution's preamble referencing God with the Declaration of Independence’s assertion that our rights come from the Creator. We have included the preambles of state constitutions that make reference to God.

State Laws

In this report we have also included laws that address religious references in the classroom. For example, **California** has an education code that protects teachers who use the Bible or other religious texts when teaching about something appropriate to the curriculum:

“ED Code 51511 — Nothing in this code shall be construed to prevent, or exclude from the public schools, references to religion or references to or the use of religious literature, dance, music, theatre, and visual arts or other things having a religious significance when such references or uses do not constitute instruction in religious principles or aid to any religious sect, church, creed, or sectarian purpose and when such references or uses are incidental to or illustrative of matters properly included in the course of study.”

In **Ohio**, educators have the freedom to post the national motto and the Ohio state motto in their classrooms. Ohio law 3313.801 states:

“[I]f a copy of the official motto of the United States of America "In God We Trust" or the official motto of Ohio "With God, All Things Are Possible" is donated to any school district, or if money is donated to the district specifically for the purpose of purchasing such material, the board of education of the school district shall accept the donation and display the motto in an

appropriate manner in a classroom, auditorium, or cafeteria of a school building in the district.”

Texas law requires schools to teach both the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and New Testament:

“Sec. 28.002. REQUIRED CURRICULUM. (a) Each school district that offers kindergarten through grade 12 shall offer, as a required curriculum...(2) an enrichment curriculum that includes...(G) religious literature, including the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and New Testament, and its impact on history and literature.”

Common Core Standards

The Common Core English/Language Arts standards recognize the importance of Bible literacy. The standards reference the Bible four times and we have indicated those for each state. It is referenced in writing standards and reading standards for eighth, ninth, and tenth grades:

“Analyze how a modern work of fiction draws on themes, patterns of events, or character types from myths, traditional stories, or religious works such as the Bible, including describing how the material is rendered new.”

“Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work (e.g., how Shakespeare treats a theme or topic from Ovid or the Bible or how a later author draws on a play by Shakespeare).”

To date, Common Core has not addressed Social Studies standards. It is yet to be seen how much the Bible, Christianity, and the Judeo-Christian heritage will be included in Common Core Social Studies standards.

Preparing Students for College

The Bible Literacy Project (www.BibleLiteracy.org) surveyed thirty-nine English professors at top universities to learn their assessment of how important Bible literacy is to college-level study of English and American literature. Almost without exception, the English professors saw knowledge of the Bible as a deeply important part of a good education. Besides college-readiness, these professors saw the Bible as culturally vital.

In its report, the Bible Literacy Project quotes professors such as Robert Kiely of Harvard University:

“The Bible has continued to be philosophically, ethically, religiously, politically influential in Western, Eastern, now African cultures, and so not to know it—whether one is a Jew or a Christian—seems to me not to understand world culture. It’s not just Western culture. And in terms of my own field, English and American literature is simply steeped in Biblical legends, morality, Biblical figures, Biblical metaphors, Biblical symbols, and so it would be like not learning a certain kind of grammar or vocabulary and trying to speak the language or read the language.”

Yale University English Professor, Linda Peterson, stated:

“I think the Bible is one of the foundational texts of Western and American literature, and so I think if you don’t read it in some religious context, you should read it in some educational setting.”

Legal Concerns

There are some who raise concerns that teaching about the Bible and Christianity—even in accordance with state standards—somehow violates a supposed separation of church and state. However, the Supreme Court does not think so. In fact, the Court has endorsed teaching about the Bible. In the famous case of *Abington School District v. Schempp* in which the Court ruled against mandatory daily Bible reading, it clarified:

“We agree, of course, that the State may not establish a ‘religion of secularism’ in the sense of affirmatively opposing or showing hostility to religion, thus ‘preferring those who believe in no religion over those who do believe.’ (*Zorach v. Clauson*)...

“In addition, it might well be said that one’s education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities.”

State academic standards are in agreement with the Court’s opinion that “the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historical qualities.”

Objectivity

It is important when teaching students about a religion that educators remain objective. The best way to achieve this is by attribution. For example, when introducing students to the religious aspects of Easter, teachers should use phrases such as, “Luke wrote that...,” or “In the Bible...”. When referring to beliefs about the story, they should use phrases such as “Christians believe...” The lesson should not be designed to prove the story is true, nor question whether the story is accurate. The goal should be to introduce students to the story and help them understand the influence it has had on history, literature, art, and music.

How to Use this Report

Because of their detail regarding the Bible, Judaism, Christianity, and the influence of Judeo-Christian thinking in the world, it would be good to read the academic standards of California, Tennessee, Texas, Massachusetts and the District of Columbia. If your state’s standards are more general, these standards may give you specific ideas.

Ideas for Teachers

1. Don’t assume your textbook incorporates your state’s academic standards regarding the Bible and Christianity. Become thoroughly familiar with the standards for your grade level.
2. Personally invest time to study Jewish and Christian history, culture, and values that you could include in lessons related to the development of Western civilization and American history.
3. Develop your confidence by reflecting on the difference between teaching about religion and the teaching of religion. You could even explain this distinction to students and parents. The California Department of Education offers this distinction:

“To teach about religion is not to instruct in religion. Teaching about religion embraces the study of various religions; appreciation of the nature and variety of religious experience historically and currently; information on past and present sources, views, and behavior of religious persons or groups; and the influence of religion on cultures and civilizations. Instruction in religion, by contrast, is to seek acceptance of and commitment to a particular religion, including a non-religion, such as secularism.”¹

5. Develop a discussion group of like-minded colleagues to formulate lesson ideas and exchange research on how to teach various aspects of your state’s standards.
6. Visit the website of Gateways to Better Education for articles and lesson ideas. (www.GoGateways.org)

Ideas for Parents

1. Distribute copies of your state’s standards to parents, teachers, school officials, and the clergy. It is important to help people understand what is possible (and even expected).
2. In a friendly manner, let your children’s teachers know that you are encouraged by your state’s standards concerning the Bible and Christianity, and ask them how they will be teaching to the standards in their classrooms.
3. Use the standards as a starting point for discussions with your children at home regarding the Bible’s influence on the world.

Conclusion

State academic standards provide ample opportunity to teach about the influence of the Bible and Christianity. However, because of misinformation, lack of information, or fear, educators in too many cases have engaged in self-censorship. Educators can be confident in teaching about the Bible and Christianity. It is academically expected, legally supported, and appropriate for helping students of all faiths and no faith understand the culture in which they live.

It is our desire that this report will prompt a discussion among educators, parents, and school officials about the need to overcome self-censorship and timidity in teaching these topics as they relate to history, culture, and values.

1. *Handbook on the Rights and Responsibilities of School Personnel and Students in the Areas of Providing Moral, Civic, and Ethical Education, Teaching About Religion, Promoting Responsible Attitudes and Behaviors, and Preventing and Responding to Hate Violence* (Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education, 1995) p.19

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**For helpful articles and a School Checklist, visit
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