

RELEASED TIME:

BY MIKE YORKEY



"Knock, knock." Helen Colburn is lightly rapping on classroom doors at Benito Juarez Elementary School in Anaheim, California. Her watch may say 10:40 a.m., but to the fourth- and fifth-graders falling in behind her, it's "Released Time."

Two, three, sometimes a dozen students emerge from each classroom and parade behind Mrs. Colburn to a portable classroom trailer parked in front of Juarez Elementary. The Released Time Christian Education portable classroom lies a mere six inches off campus - the distance between the trailer and the sidewalk. An orange extension cord runs from the trailer to a separate electric meter box nailed to a telephone pole; this way, the school district is not liable for the electricity that runs the trailer's lights and air conditioning.

In the new millennium, the separation between church and state can be measured in inches and kilowatts, but public schools and religious education can coexist - and have done so for more than 85 years in a little-known program called Released Time education.

The Released Time trailer is simple and spartan. Ten wooden desks with laminated tops and a half-dozen metal chairs are shoehorned into an 8-by-20-foot space, giving the feeling that Mrs. Colburn is a modern-day "Old Woman in a Shoe" who had so many children that she didn't know what to do.

Why so spartan? There's no room for more. At Juarez Elementary alone, just over 100 fourth- and fifth-graders participate in Released Time education. Some of the 32 students in the present class are sitting three to a desk.

Released Time education dates back to 1914, when Indiana migrants successfully petitioned their school districts to allow religious instruction. The principle of off-campus religious instruction was upheld



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in a landmark 1952 U.S. Supreme Court ruling which affirmed that states may pass laws allowing students to be released from class once a week for off-campus religious instruction.

Writing for the majority, Justice William O. Douglas penned, "[We] find no constitutional requirement which makes it necessary for government to be hostile to religion and to throw its weight against efforts to widen the effective scope of religious influence."

Whether Released Time education is welcome in the public square varies from state to state: presently, 30 states have Released Time programs. An estimated 250,000 public school students participate nationally. Most of these are elementary school students.

Released Time is a grassroots activity, started and maintained by local

ministerial associations - pastors and their churches banding together to sponsor extracurricular religious education. "The more churches working together, the better," explains John Atkinson, president of the Fellowship of Christian Released Time Ministries, based in Long Beach, California.

The "released time" concept is open to all faiths. The Mormon Church has purchased land adjacent to public schools in Utah and Idaho for the sole purpose of offering classes in Mormon religious instruction. Muslims offer a handful of classes in major cities.

The vast majority of Released Time classes, however, remain nondenominational Christian, and independent programs have been established in upstate New York, South Carolina, rural Pennsylvania, suburban Southern California and the Pacific Northwest. These nonprofit associations rely on contributions from private donors and area churches to defray operating costs, pay liability insurance, and purchase Bibles for the students. John Atkinson estimates that 85 percent of Released Time teachers are volunteers.

Classes can be held in trailers parked curbside, as they are in Anaheim where Mrs. Colburn's "chapel on wheels" is hitched to a truck and moved each day to a new school - five in all. Nationally, however, most Released Time classes take place in nearby homes, local churches - even an outdoor park. In Ellijay, Georgia, churches banded together to build the Christian Learning Center next door to a public high school. Hundreds of teen students walk 100 feet through a gate to