



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on December 20, 2023

Bible Study in Public School Generating Pushback From Atheists

When asked about any resistance to his program inviting public-school students to explore the Gospel during regular school hours, LifeWise Academy founder Joel Penton [said](#), “Most schools and parents are very open to the idea. Schools know there is a great need [for the Gospel] in the lives of students. And seeing as it’s an entirely optional program, there simply aren’t many people who see it as a problem.”

Within days of making that statement in August, the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) saw it as a problem and leapt to the ramparts, [sending a warning to every school district in Ohio](#) — all 600 of them — that this voluntary, free, off-campus, Supreme Court-allowed program that has virtually exploded over the last few years in Ohio and elsewhere was somehow dangerous.

It urged them “not to be pressured into allowing released time for students to attend Bible study programs.” Some districts throughout the state “have unfortunately begun approving release time for LifeWise Bible study classes ... [and] that districts that have not already implemented [it] to refrain from doing so, since Ohio law does not require allowing this disruption to the school day.”

This has further spurred the growth of LifeWise, and Penton was surprised and delighted at the back-handed endorsement of his life’s work:

We were asked to make a public comment about them sending this letter, because we heard about it and, of course, we publicly thanked the Freedom From Religion Foundation for investing their time and money to spread the word about LifeWise.

Because ... when people learn about it, they tend to get pretty excited, and the people that don’t like it are a very, very small minority.

Penton, a former Ohio State football player, was interviewed by Rob Bluey at The Daily Signal recently and explained that his academy started in 2019 with just two schools signing up for the voluntary program. Now, a quarter of those 600 Ohio school districts have adopted the program, and it is spreading across the land, with nearly 30,000 students in 12 states taking advantage of it. Said Penton:

We believe it’s the single greatest missed opportunity to reach the next generation with the word of God. And so I’ll tell you what it is.



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LifeWise is what's known as a released time religious instruction program. Little do most people realize that in 1952, the Supreme Court ruled [in [Zorach v. Clauson](#)] that public school students can be released from school during school hours — that's the key phrase — during the school day, they can be released to receive religious classes as long as the program is off school property, privately funded, and with parental permission....

This could change our nation.

LifeWise follows the Nicene Creed, and its program is based on The Gospel Project, a Christ-centered, chronological Bible study program that takes students on a five-year journey through the Scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation, one hour a week. The program starts in Genesis in the first grade and finishes up in Revelation in the fifth grade. The Gospel Project focuses on "God's plan to rescue His people from sin through the life, death, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ," according to LifeWise.

Each lesson is tied to a specific character trait important to the growth of each student over time. For example, the first five chapters of Genesis — "God Created the World" — exemplifies the character trait Gratitude for His great goodness in doing so. The Christmas story — Luke 1:26-56, 2:1-20 and Matthew 1:18-24 and 2:1-21, "Jesus Was Born" — promotes the character trait of Joy at His entry from eternity into time to save us.

The benefits are already being felt in those school districts adopting the voluntary program: Suspensions are down significantly, while attendance at other classes has increased greatly. As Penton notes, "Kids are much more interested in going to school.... In fact there's an increase in [overall] class time if LifeWise is implemented."

The program is legal in all 50 states, "and so," said Penton, "we don't see any reason why we shouldn't have programs pop up in all 50 states."

Perhaps Penton could enlist the assistance of FFRF to write similar letters of disdain for his program to all the school districts in every other state to help him along.



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