

Addressing the Hole in Whole Child Education

Why public schools need to engage the spiritual side of students and how to do it without mixing church and state



This article is adapted from Eric Buehrer's presentation to a gathering of superintendents and school board members at the annual convention of the California School Board Association.

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By Eric Buehrer

More and more educators are seeing the importance of addressing not only the intellectual and physical needs of students but also their emotional, social, and health needs. However, what is missing in the current dialogue about “Whole Child Education” are ideas for addressing the spiritual needs of students.

When the subject of “religion in schools” comes up, it usually involves a debate over *teaching* about religion. The debate centers around *what* should be taught, *when* it should be taught, *how* much should be taught, and *who* should teach it.

However, schools need to look at the issue in another way: *engaging students’ existing religious orientation as a learning asset to help them succeed academically and behaviorally*. Religion is a powerful force in helping students succeed and schools are doing themselves a disservice if they ignore this force in their students’ lives.

Only focusing on how well students learn information

requires examining it through the lens of their values and beliefs. This often involves students’ religious faith.

Engagement of Religion as an Academic Asset

Welcoming and engaging students’ deepest beliefs as they apply to learning is academically helpful and can be done in ways that are very appropriate for public schools. We will examine how this is:

1. Supportive of academic goals
2. Supportive of college-readiness
3. Supportive of Twenty-first century skills
4. Culturally relevant and responsive
5. Legally balanced

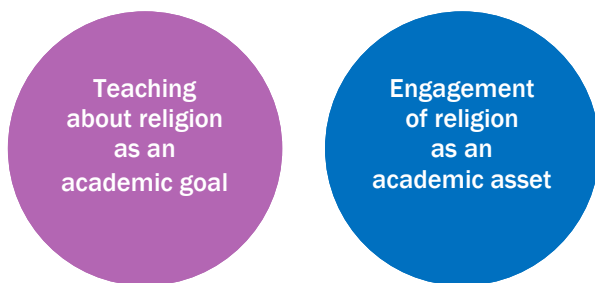
1. SUPPORTIVE OF ACADEMIC GOALS

Research has shown that religion has a positive effect on academic achievement among students. For example, research from Stanford University’s Graduate School of Education found that students who practice their religion on a regular basis have an average GPA of 3.21 compared to 2.92 for those with no religion. Researcher, Ilana Horwitz, reported that religiosity was the key factor that accounted for the variance in school grades:

“This pattern holds after accounting for race, religious denomination, sex, mother’s education level, and income.”¹

Horwitz pointed out that “being religious helps adolescents at the middle and high school level because they have learned the very habits that public schools are structured to reward: conscientiousness and cooperation.”

Two ways to address religion in the classroom



— how well they score against academic standards — is like saying that because an auto mechanic knows how to build a car, he will know where to drive it. We confuse knowing something — getting the answer right — with understanding its meaning for shaping their lives. To do that

“The religious orientation of students is beneficial to schools in their quest for academic success.”

Dr. Willem Jeynes of California State University, Long Beach, conducted a meta-analysis of thirty studies involving over 1 million students to find the factors that best reduce the achievement gap. He found that:

“Of all the variables under study for their relationship with reducing the achievement gap, religious faith had the highest effect size for reducing the achievement gap.”²

The journal, *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, published a study involving over 7,500 children. The study entitled the “Relationship between family religious behaviors and child well-being among third-grade children” concluded:

“...family attendance at religious [or] spiritual programs was significantly correlated with improved child health, vocabulary, reading, math, and social skills.”³

Two researchers at the University of Notre Dame’s Institute for Latino Studies published a report entitled “Religion Matters: Predicting School Success among Latino Youth,” which states:

“Findings indicate that Latino students who actively attended church or who saw their religious faith as very important to their lives achieved higher grades in school; stayed on track in school; had less trouble with teachers, other students, and homework; and identified with school more strongly than did other Latino students. Religious practice was especially important for the educational success of Latino youth living in impoverished neighborhoods.”⁴

In another study on “The Role of Religion in Promoting Academic Success for Black Students,” researchers found:

“Black students who participated in more religious activities and who had stronger religious convictions were more likely to report higher grades in school, had a positive self-concept, positive feelings about school, parents involved with their education, and fewer disciplinary referrals.”⁵

We should not use findings like these to assert that schools ought to promote any particular religion. Instead, findings like these point to the fact that public schools are missing a wonderful asset in their desire to help students succeed *academically*. The religious orientation of students is beneficial to schools in their quest for academic success.

2. SUPPORTIVE OF COLLEGE READINESS

Religious involvement plays a significant role in educational attainment. Researchers analyzed data from over 8,000 students and reported:

“The effects of religious involvement on college enrollment are quite similar to those of high school completion. Any religious affiliation increased the odds of college enrollment compared to being unaffiliated....Youth who identified as mainline Protestant, black Protestant, Catholic, and other religion all had about an 80 percent increase in the odds compared to unaffiliated. The odds of conservative Protestants enrolling in college were 35 percent higher than unaffiliated.”⁶

Similarly, in her report “Does Church Attendance Really Increase Schooling?” Linda D. Lounsbury of Tufts University concluded that “religiosity during adolescence has a significant effect on total number of years of schooling attained.”⁷

A report on college grades and satisfaction among students published in *Sociology of Religion* observed that:

“Students who attended religious services once a week or more during their last year of high school reported higher grades at college than nonregular religious attendees.”⁸

Religious involvement has a strong and positive effect on college readiness. While public schools cannot promote church attendance, they can affirm its value for the many students who already attend religious services.

3. SUPPORTS TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SKILLS

Incorporating faith-friendly policies and practices will also have a positive effect on skills students need for



twenty-first century learning. Read the literature on twenty-first century skills that need to be cultivated in schools and you will find things like:

- The student assumes responsibility in collaborative learning
- The student engages in respectful team work
- The student uses information ethically
- The student demonstrates positive social skills.

For students with religious backgrounds, their faith traditions support these positive attributes. Educators can enhance these skills by appropriately affirming students' existing religious backgrounds and inspiring them with how people of faith — such as Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. — demonstrated these skills.

4. CULTURALLY RELEVANT AND RESPONSIVE

There are two institutions in every community that have the most influence on the development of children: schools and churches. However, too often they act as silos of activities, rarely, if ever, working together. And if they work together, it usually involves local churches helping schools with clean-up projects, providing crates of supplies to teachers, giving backpacks to underprivileged children, offering after-school mentoring programs, and the like. What do schools do for the faith community?

Too often schools merely *tolerate* the faith community among their own students. A school might have a Christian student club (because the law requires allowing it). It might rent a campus to a church for Sunday services (which has nothing to do with the climate of the school Monday through Friday). Other than those two examples, what do schools do for the faith community Monday through Friday?

Now, you may be thinking, “That’s not a school’s responsibility.” However, I’d like you to consider something about *who* is involved in your schools. In polling done by the Barna Group it was discovered that:

- “84% of churchgoing parents send their children to public schools”
- “Nearly half of the nation’s public educators are practicing Christians—people who attend church at least monthly and say their faith is very important in their life.”
- “Of those who regularly volunteer at public schools, 65% attend church.”⁹

In other words, your schools are filled with churchgoing people. Your classrooms need to be responsive to this rather than simply ignore it. Creating a faith-friendly environment that welcomes and engages students’ deeply-held beliefs and values is a way of giving back to the faith community.

Religious Students in Your Schools

The majority of your students come from homes with religious backgrounds. Yet, too often this is not acknowledged or affirmed in a public school environment.

The U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that, 80 percent of high school *seniors* indicate that religion plays a role in their lives. It reported that 55 percent consider their religion as “very important” or “pretty important.” Only 20 percent indicate that religion is not important in their lives.¹⁰

In 2009 (the latest data), the NCES reported that 51 percent of ninth-grade students participate in after-school



religious youth groups or religious instruction. This ranked second only to sports (55 percent).¹¹

In its 2010 publication, Columbia University’s National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse reported that 57 percent of teens attended religious services at least two times a month. Forty-four percent do so weekly.¹²

However, rather than tap into this valuable asset for academic and behavioral success, public education today has unnecessarily disconnected students from their spiritual lives while at school. Too many educators communicate that religion isn’t welcome in class. Even when schools acknowledge students have a right to express their faith, they too often merely tolerate it rather than encourage it and affirm it.

Research about the positive influence of religion on student performance doesn’t mean we should *promote* any particular religion in schools. But neither do we need to treat religious people and the faith community in our school districts like the annoying neighbor down the street who is tolerated but not welcomed.

We do students a grave disservice when we do not encourage them to integrate what they at least claim is important in their lives with how they actually live their lives.

For too many students there is a disconnection between what they say is important in their lives and how they actually conduct themselves. And today’s schools make it easy for them to live with that disconnection. In fact, in the name of the “separation of church and state” schools even *encourage* that disconnection!

Medical researchers warn us that we do that at the peril of our students. Dartmouth Medical School, in conjunction with the YMCA USA and the Institute for American Values, assembled a distinguished panel of medical doctors and researchers from Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, UCLA, and Columbia, to examine how to address the needs of students. In its report, *Hardwired to Connect*, the panel warned:

“Denying or ignoring the spiritual needs of adolescents may end up creating a void in their lives that either devolves into depression or is filled by other forms of questing and challenge, such as drinking, unbridled consumerism, petty crime, sexual precocity, or flirtations with violence.”¹³

The report concluded:

“We recommend that youth-serving organizations purposively seek to promote the moral and spiritual development of children, recognizing that children’s moral and spiritual needs are as genuine, and as integral to their personhood, as their physical and intellectual needs...

...finding new ways to strengthen, and not ignore or stunt, children’s moral and spiritual selves may be the single most important challenge facing youth service professionals and youth-serving organizations.”¹⁴

Public schools can welcome, affirm, and engage students’ religious values and beliefs. Doing so will not only be responsive to the faith community throughout your schools, it will also, as the research shows, enhance students’ academic and behavioral success.

5. LEGALLY BALANCED

The biggest objection from educators is that addressing religion in public schools is illegal. They assume it violates the “separation of church and state.” Unfortunately, this paranoia about establishing religion has led teachers to do exactly the opposite of what is good for students’ development.

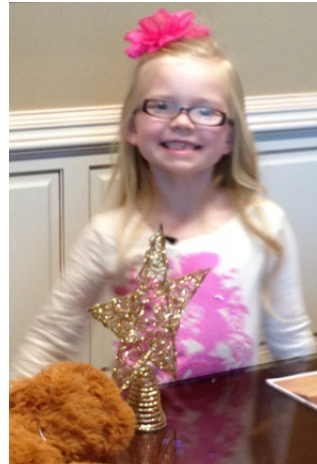
For example, as Christmas approached, a teacher in a California elementary school gave all the students a “share bag” and told them to bring something from home that represented a family holiday tradition and share about it in class. First-grader Brynn Williams took the Star of Bethlehem from the top of the family Christmas tree. She worked diligently on her one-minute presentation to explain to the class that her family’s tradition is to remember the birth of Jesus. When it came time for her presentation, she got about two sentences into explaining that the three wise men followed the star to Bethlehem. The teacher abruptly stopped her, told her to sit down, and explained to the whole class that she was not allowed to talk about the Bible in class.

As the saying goes, more is caught than taught in schools. The message Brynn and the rest of the class caught by the actions of the teacher was that their faith wasn’t welcome in the classroom.

In the name of the “separation of church and state,” teachers are unintentionally creating a climate that disconnects the students’ spiritual selves with their educational selves. Sadly, a factor that has tremendously positive effects on students’ achievement – religion – is being suppressed in their lives.

We Don’t Talk about Grandma

A friend once shared an illustration with me that highlights the absurdity some have reached regarding schools needing to be religion-free zones. He said, imagine this scenario: Johnny is doing really well in school and his



Brynn Williams

teacher asks him what he thinks has made the difference in his life. Johnny responds, “Well, it’s my grandma. I love her, and she loves me. And she inspires me and I want to please her.”

Now, imagine if the teacher says, “We don’t talk about grandma here. Grandma isn’t appropriate for public schools.” We all agree that would be outrageous. But that, too often, is what we do with religion.

The Supreme Court addressed the idea of “separation of church and state” in the case of *Lynch v. Donnelly*. The Court stated:

“The concept of a ‘wall’ of separation between church and state is a useful metaphor but is not an accurate description of the practical aspects of the relationship that in fact exists. The Constitution does not require complete separation of church and state; it affirmatively mandates accommodation, not merely tolerance, of all religions, and forbids hostility toward any. Anything less would require the ‘callous indifference,’ that was never intended by the Establishment Clause.”¹⁵

Most educators would be surprised to learn that the Supreme Court assumes public school students are singing Christmas carols at school. In *Lynch v. Donnelly*, while ruling that a public display of a crèche was constitutional, the Court commented:

“It would be ironic if the inclusion of the crèche in the display, as part of a celebration of an event acknowledged in the Western World for 20 centuries, and in this country by the people, the Executive Branch, Congress, and the courts for 2 centuries, would so ‘taint’ the exhibition as to render it violative of the Establishment Clause. To forbid the use of this one passive symbol while hymns and carols are sung and played in public places including schools, and while Congress and state legislatures open public sessions with prayers, would be an overreaction contrary to this Nation’s history and this Court’s holdings.”¹⁶ (emphasis added)

In the case of *Abington School District v. Schempp*, which prohibited mandatory daily Bible reading in school, the Court endorsed reading the Bible in public school for academic purposes:

“[I]t 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.”¹⁷

In the case of *Stone v. Graham* regarding the display of the Ten Commandments, the Court ruled that arbitrary posting of the Commandments was unconstitutional but clarified that:

“This is not a case in which the Ten Commandments are integrated into the school curriculum, where the Bible may constitutionally be used in an appropriate study of history, civilization, ethics, comparative religion, or the like.”¹⁸

Freedom of Religious Expression

Educators need to create an environment that is faith-friendly and welcomes students to express their religious values in word and deed. In fact, the U.S. Department of Education has issued guidelines since 1995 (most recently in 2020) clarifying students' and teachers religious liberties:



STUDENTS

1. You can pray, read your Bible or other religious material, and talk about your faith at school.
2. You can organize prayer groups and religious clubs, and you can announce your meetings.
3. You can express your faith in your class work and homework.
4. You can wear clothing with religious messages.
5. You may be able to go off campus to have religious studies during school hours.
6. You can express your faith at a school event.
7. You can express your faith at your graduation ceremony.
8. You can pass out religious literature at school.

EDUCATORS:

1. Educators and school employees can pray at school.
2. Educators can teach about religion in class.
3. Schools can accommodate religious instruction and prayer during school.

One of the simplest ways to create a more faith-welcoming environment is to inform students and their parents of the U.S. Department of Education guidelines. This sends a strong message to the faith community that your schools respect their religious faith and will protect its expression. It also heads off possible complaints from those parents who think public schools must be religion-free zones. If everyone understands the federal government's guidelines, teachers won't be overly repressive in banning religious expression and non-religious parents won't feel the need to "sound the alarm" just because a student talks about his faith in class.

Educators can avoid the extremes of censorship and suppression on the one hand, and endorsement and proselytizing on the other hand. Everything we need to fix the problem is already available to us in academic standards and legal codes. We don't need any new laws. We need a new vision for what must be done and how to do it.

I am not talking about offering an elective course on the Bible as literature (though that is good). I am not talking about beginning the day with teacher-led prayer in class (though 34 states have laws regarding moments of silence at the beginning of the day). I am not talking about what could be described as symbolic gestures that acknowledge Christianity (like prayer at school board meetings or graduation ceremonies). I am talking about intentionally and robustly improving the way schools engage the religious orientation of their students.

Affirmation without Endorsement

When students express faith-based ideas, teachers can affirm students' faith without endorsing it. Teachers should become comfortable with and adept at using faith-affirming phrases. For example, after a student shares a viewpoint based on his or her religious faith, the teacher might respond with:

“Thanks for sharing. That's really interesting.”

“I see your point. You should incorporate it in your essay.”

“I like that you've made the connection between your faith and the point the author makes in the book.”



“Too many educators think their classrooms must be religion-free zones.”

These kinds of responses reinforce to the student that he or she is thinking deeply and connecting life to learning.

Educators cannot endorse any religious faith, but it is legally and educationally sound to affirm students' existing religious orientation. However, for teachers to feel comfortable doing this, school leaders need to change educators' understanding of what can be done in the classroom. Too many educators think their classrooms must be religion-free zones, or at best, they tolerate its expression, but don't encourage it.

Therefore, one of the primary tasks school leaders need to do is work to change the assumptions that educators live by in their classrooms. Educators need to realize that engaging students' religious values in the learning process is not only legal, it is an academic asset.



CREATING A SCHOOL CULTURE OF INCLUSION

To engage students' existing religious orientation as a learning asset for academic and behavioral success, we need to foster an inclusive rather than exclusive school culture:

1. **Exclusive classrooms** hinder students from expressing their faith. **Inclusive classrooms** have teachers who know students' religious freedoms and then explicitly inform students of those freedoms each year.
2. **Exclusive classrooms** censor religious holidays as if they are annual distractions that must be sanitized. **Inclusive classrooms** acknowledge the social and cultural beauty of religious holidays that are reflective of the majority of their students, their families, and their community.
3. **Exclusive classrooms** reflect the false assumption that they must be religion-free zones. **Inclusive classrooms** occur when teachers understand that there are

academic and behavioral advantages from intentionally making their classrooms faith-friendly places.

None of this is illegal. None of this endorses a religion. None of this is inappropriate. All of this will help your schools give back to the faith community in your district. It says to them, “You trust us with your children and we value what you have poured into their lives. We won't ignore it; we will welcome it. We won't oppose it; we will affirm it.” In the process it will produce students who are academically and ethically stronger.

Earlier I asked you what your schools do for the faith community. Now you have some idea where to begin. And together, the school community and the faith community can raise a generation of young people who will create a better tomorrow for themselves, for America, and for the world. ■

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ENDNOTES

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National Organizations Endorse Teaching about Religion in Public Schools

Religion in the Public School Curriculum

"Because religion plays a significant role in history, study about religion is essential to understanding both the nation and the world. Omission of facts about religion can give students the false impression that the religious life of humankind is insignificant or unimportant." ⁱ

A statement agreed upon by seventeen organizations including: National School Boards Association, American Association of School Administrators, National Council for the Social Studies, American Federation of Teachers, Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Religion in the Public Schools

"The history of religion, comparative religion, the Bible (or other scripture) as literature (either as a separate course or within some other existing course), are all permissible public school subjects. It is both permissible and desirable to teach objectively about the role of religion in the history of the United States and other countries." ⁱⁱ

From *Religion in Public Schools*, a document drafted by twelve organizations including the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).

NEA Resolution I-21: Freedom of Religion

The National Education Association "believes that schools should teach the rights and responsibilities associated with the freedom of and from religion, the religious heritage and diversity of the United States, respect for the beliefs of others, and the historical and cultural influences of various world religions." ⁱⁱⁱ

- i. "Religion in the Public School Curriculum: Questions and Answers," *Finding Common Ground* (First Amendment Center) 2001, p. 90
- ii. "Religion in the Public Schools: A Joint Statement of Current Law" (1995)
- iii. 2021-2022 NEA Resolutions; www.nea.org



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