

MSNBC's Bizarre Treatment of Bible Ministry Sparks Shock: 'Like a 'Saturday Night Live' Sketch'

The founder and CEO of an organization that provides Bible education during the public school day said recent MSNBC coverage of his efforts was so bizarre it felt like a "Saturday Night Live" sketch.

"The MSNBC piece frankly, to me, was hilarious," Joel Penton, founder of LifeWise Academy, told CBN News. "It genuinely felt like an 'SNL' sketch."

Even a brief viewing of the nine-minute MSNBC segment—which reportedly left out positive data from LifeWise showing academic improvements among participants—provides context to exactly what Penton is describing.

Titled, "Christian group uses public school-adjacent Bible study program to breach church-state wall," the video segment, led by host Alex Wagner, said LifeWise is "raising serious questions about the separation of church and state" despite Bible studies taking place during free periods and off campus.

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"Penton's LifeWise Academy is currently influencing the minds of public school kids in progressive cities like Columbus," Wagner, who called Penton's work "distressing," said. She added he wants to reach every public school in America and warned of the impact on progressive ideals.

Wagner continued, "Blue Islands ... those blue islands in red

states and swing states ... they could be swayed by LifeWise."

At other points in the report, warnings were heeded that some LifeWise chapters "promised ice cream or popcorn parties if kids got their friends to sign up" and that the organization somehow "found a legal way to offer Bible lessons."

"I just wonder if this is not running afoul of certain First Amendment stuff," Wagner added.

Penton found the entire segment—a segment for which he and his team willingly sat down with NBC—quite odd.

"That they would turn it into something that they find distressing ... it was funny," he said.

Penton said he has done many interviews about LifeWise and spent a long time with the NBC team. He was surprised to see it all boiled down into a few minutes, with the material being framed in a way that "wasn't really balanced."

So far, LifeWise has exceeded its goal of reaching 25 schools by 2025 and is already in more than 300 schools in multiple states—and the organization is only poised to grow.

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Penton explained the parameters of how it all works.

"In the same way that a child will maybe have art class once a week, and music class once a week, and gym class a couple times a week, through our program, a public school student can have Bible class once per week," he said. "It has to be off school property, privately-funded, parent-permitted, but the Supreme Court has ruled on this, there's state laws about it."

Penton is referring to "release time" rules allowing kids to get religious instruction during the school day. LifeWise

launched in 2019, after Penton heard about another effort in his hometown of Van Wert, Ohio, to educate children about Christian values during the public school day.

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