

Will Bible School Program Protest Backfire on Atheistic Organization?

LifeWise Academy's Bible school program, designed to offer released-time religious instruction for public school students, has come under scrutiny from the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), an advocacy organization known for promoting secularism.

The atheistic FFRF has expressed concerns about this program, citing potential violations of the constitutional separation of church and state. The FFRF is notorious for citing an incorrect "constitutional interpretation" of the separation of church and state in dozens of other legal cases.

An Ohio-based ministry, LifeWise Academy launched its Bible school program in 2019 to provide an optional avenue for public school students to receive religious instruction. The program allows students to attend off-campus Bible classes during regular school hours, provided that these classes are not directly endorsed by the school itself. Approximately 300 schools across 11 states have adopted this program, indicating a significant interest from both schools and parents.

The controversy arises from the FFRF's perspective, which argues that the program infringes upon the principle of separation of church and state enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. The FFRF claims that allowing released-time Bible classes during school hours is an unconstitutional promotion of religion by public schools.

They argue that students who choose not to attend these classes are unfairly burdened with additional homework or busy work, creating a sense of exclusion.

“At minimum, school districts allowing released time must ensure that district staff members are aware of their obligations under the constitution,” FRFF’s Sammi Lawrence said in a letter to the school districts. “A public school district cannot constitutionally encourage student attendance at released time Bible classes, nor may it expend district resources to promote, organize or otherwise facilitate released time Bible classes.”

The FRFF’s protest may backfire on the secular organization. A spokesperson for LifeWise Academy told The Christian Post in a statement Thursday that they welcome the attention the FRFF has brought to the situation.

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“Our greatest obstacle is not enough people know about the amazing opportunity LifeWise offers students, so we appreciate the FFRF investing their resources to help spread the word,” the spokesperson said.

“They did a wonderful job pointing out released time religious instruction as an entirely legal option for schools and families. We trust school officials and parents to make good educational decisions for their communities without being bullied by the efforts of outside activists.”

LifeWise Academy sees its program as a valuable educational opportunity for students. In an interview with The Christian Post, Joel Penton, the founder, and CEO of LifeWise, explained that the program has faced less resistance than anticipated.

Many schools and parents are open to the idea, recognizing the need for moral and ethical education in students’ lives. Importantly, LifeWise emphasizes that participation in their program is entirely optional, ensuring that those who do not wish to attend are not compelled to do so.

In response to the FFRF's objections, LifeWise maintains that their program operates within the boundaries of the law. The U.S. Supreme Court's 1952 ruling in *Zorach v. Clauson* upheld the constitutionality of released-time programs, asserting that the government should not show hostility towards religion.

Instead, it should accommodate the religious needs of its citizens as long as the program remains optional and off-campus.

LifeWise Academy argues that their program adheres to this precedent, allowing students to exercise their religious beliefs without imposing them on others. It asserts that its Bible classes are not endorsed or organized directly by the public schools, thus respecting the separation of church and state.

The debate over the program highlights the delicate balance between religious freedom and the secular nature of public education in the United States. {eo}

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