

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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July 1, 2022

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: Commissioner@fldoe.org

Manny Diaz, Jr
Commissioner
Florida Department of Education
Turlington Building, Suite 1514
325 West Gaines Street
Tallahassee, Florida 32399

Re: Christian and conservative ideology-infused new state civics initiative must be revised

Dear Commissioner Diaz:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to object to Florida's incorporation of Christian ideology in its new state civics initiative. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 37,000 members across the country, including more than 1,800 members and a local chapter in Florida, the Central Florida Freethought Community. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church and educates about nontheism.

We have already received complaints from our Florida membership who are parents, who are gravely concerned about their children being indoctrinated in Christian nationalism as part of the newly unveiled "Civil Literacy Excellence Initiative." As Baptist Joint Committee President Amanda Tyler explains: "Christian nationalism is a political ideology and cultural framework that seeks to merge American and Christian identities, distorting both the Christian faith and America's constitutional democracy. Christian nationalism relies on the mythological founding of the United States as a 'Christian nation,' singled out for God's providence in order to fulfill God's purposes on earth. Christian nationalism demands a privileged place for Christianity in public life, buttressed by the active support of government at all levels."¹

We write to urge the Florida Department of Education to immediately revisit its civics standards with the input of certified historians and experts, those without a political or personal religious agenda, who can truly serve as role models for Florida's students on the importance of truth, integrity, and other civic and academic values. The Civic Literacy Excellence Initiative was developed by a private Christian college and an institute known for promoting a reactionary conservative view of the United States Constitution — and it shows.

¹ Christian Nationalism and the January 6, 2021 Insurrection, published by the Baptist Joint Committee and the Freedom From Religion Foundation, February 2022, Introduction by Amanda Tyler
https://bjconline.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Christian_Nationalism_and_the_Jan6_Insurrection-2-9-22.pdf

On July 13, 2021, Governor Ron DeSantis announced that Florida would be spending \$106 million to establish the Civic Literacy Excellence Initiative.² A portion of those funds have been used to train public school teachers across the state on how to teach civics as part of the governor’s initiative. It is our understanding that the first training sessions were June 20-22, at Broward College in Davie. While the revised standards were intended to “fully elevate civic literacy and education for Florida’s students and teachers, beyond any state in the nation,” instead, it has been reported that the new standards have infused Christian and conservative ideology into Florida’s civics curriculum. Instructors reportedly told Broward teachers “the nation’s founders did not desire a strict separation of state and church, downplayed the role the colonies and later the United States had in the history of slavery in America, and pushed a judicial theory, favored by legal conservatives like DeSantis, that requires people to interpret the Constitution as the framers intended it, not as a living, evolving document]. . .”³

The state’s workshops were reportedly developed with the help of the Bill of Rights Institute, founded by Charles Koch, as well as Hillsdale College, a pervasively sectarian private Christian institution, which was founded “out of gratitude to God ‘for the inestimable blessings resulting from the prevalence of civil and religious liberty and intelligent piety in the land.’”⁴ It is our understanding that the state aims to train about 2,500 teachers in 10 sessions across the state through voluntary three-day sessions, but that teachers are given a \$700 stipend as an incentive to attend. We understand that teachers will also be eligible for a \$3,000 bonus if they complete a 60-hour online course on the new civics standards and earn a “Civics Seal of Excellence Endorsement.”

The Miami Herald has reported that after the first wave of trainings for teachers regarding the new standards, many teachers have been outraged by what they are expected to teach:⁵

“It was very skewed,” said Barbara Segal, a 12th-grade government teacher at Fort Lauderdale High School. “There was a very strong Christian fundamentalist way toward analyzing different quotes and different documents. That was concerning.”

The Herald noted that “the founding fathers’ intent and the ‘misconceptions’ about their thinking were a main theme of the training.”⁶

One slide underscored that the “Founders expected religion to be promoted because they believed it to be essential to civic virtue.” Without virtue, another slide noted, citizens become “licentious” and become subject to tyranny. Another slide highlights three U.S. Supreme Court cases to show when the “Founders’ original intent began to change.” That included the 1962 landmark case that found

² <https://www.fl DOE.org/academics/standards/subject-areas/social-studies/civics-lei.html>

³ https://denvergazette.com/news/nation-world/florida-teachers-alarmed-by-state-s-infusing-religion-downplaying-raise-in-civics-training/article_501de2f2-32df-54b9-b6b6-fa777e28aa28.html

⁴ Honor Code, Hillsdale college, <https://www.hillsdale.edu/campus-life/honor-code/>

⁵ <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/education/article262941378.html>

⁶ *Id.*

school-sponsored prayer violated the establishment clause of the First Amendment, which Judd said trainers viewed as unjust. At one point, the trainers equated it to the 1892 U.S. Supreme Court decision that upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation under the “separate but equal” doctrine. “Ending school prayer was compared to upholding segregation,” Judd said. In other words, he said, trainers called both those rulings unjust.

Another teacher noted that during breakout sessions, the state’s presenters repeatedly mentioned the influence Jesus Christ and the Bible have in the country’s foundation: “There was this Christian nationalism philosophy that was just baked into everything that was there.”

The teacher further explained that “for years mentioned Christianity as an influence in American history, but the state’s trainers were telling teachers to go beyond that,” and that “the state delivered the instruction in a way that made it seem as though Christianity was the ‘only viewpoint’ that the Founding Fathers had in mind for the country.” “People were profoundly religious in those eras. It’s not to be discounted one bit,” Judd said. “But their [the state’s] thesis that the intent of the founders was to have this wonderful Christian world is a specious claim at best.”

Another teacher reported that “[t]he presenters said that it was because [Thomas] Jefferson when he said ‘wall of separation between church and state,’ he didn’t mean it.”⁷ Please find a slew of objectionable material from the training attached, including material falsely claiming it was a misconception that the Founders desired a strict separation between church and state, and overemphasizing the role of Christianity in our founding.

The noteworthy aspect of our founding documents is the *lack of* religious influence. Rejecting a religious monarchy, the Founders worked tirelessly to advocate for a separation of church and state. In his Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments, James Madison stated: “Torrents of blood have been spilt in the old world, by vain attempts of the secular arm, to extinguish Religious discord, by proscribing all difference in Religious opinion.”⁸ The U.S. Constitution is an entirely godless document, whose only references to religion are exclusionary.

Public schools have a duty to ensure that instructional materials and lessons do not promote a particular religious viewpoint. “[T]he discretion of the States and local school boards in matters of education must be exercised in a manner that comports with the transcendent imperatives of the First Amendment.” *Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 U.S. 578, 583 (1987) (finding unconstitutional a statute allowing the teaching of creationism, a religious belief, in classrooms). The Supreme Court in *Edwards* recognized that “[f]amilies entrust public schools with the education of their children, but condition their trust on the understanding that the classroom will not purposely be

⁷<https://www.news4jax.com/news/local/2022/06/29/florida-teachers-raise-concerns-about-new-civics-training-say-it-downplays-slavery-promotes-originalism/>

⁸ Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments, c. 1785, James Madison <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-08-02-0163>

used to advance religious views that may conflict with the private beliefs of the student and his or her family.” *Id.* at 584.

State education exists to cultivate the minds of young students and promote independent thinking, in short to educate, not to indoctrinate. The Florida Department of Education is a public entity and must make its decisions based on truth, accuracy, and expertise, not on political or religious ideology. It should not be misleading and miseducating students regarding the nation’s legal and founding history. We urge the Department of Education to consult with unbiased experts to remove the inaccurate materials from its curriculum to promote an accurate and secular understanding of the country’s history as the Constitution protects.

Teaching students false, biased information about American history particularly stigmatizes and alienates non-religious students. About a third of U.S. teens (32 percent) say they are religiously unaffiliated, including 6 percent who describe themselves as atheists, 4 percent who are agnostics and 23 percent who say their religion is “nothing in particular.”⁹ Non-religious Americans are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification — 35 percent of Americans are non-Christians, and this includes the more than three-in-ten adult Americans (29 percent) who now identify as religiously unaffiliated.¹⁰ A recent survey found that 21 percent of Americans born after 1999 are atheist or agnostic.¹¹

In order to provide Florida’s students with accurate information, it is necessary that the Board of Education remove miseducation about the Founders and Framers from Florida’s civics standards. Only then can it “fully elevate civic literacy and education for Florida’s students and teachers, beyond any state in the nation.” With over 2.8 million minds to cultivate, the Board of Education has a duty to impart factual information. These students are the future of this country, which was founded on the basis of freedom *of*, and necessarily freedom *from*, religion in government and public schools.

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker
Co-presidents
ALG/DB:cal

Enclosures

⁹ *Religious affiliation among American adolescents* Pew Research Center (Sep. 10, 2020), available at www.pewresearch.org/religion/2020/09/10/religious-affiliation-among-american-adolescents/.

¹⁰ *About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults are Now Religiously Unaffiliated* Pew Research Center (Dec. 14, 2021), available at www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/.

¹¹ *Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z*, The Barna Group (Jan. 24, 2018), www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/.



Misconception: *The Founders desired strict separation of church and state and the Founders only wanted to protect Freedom of worship.*

New England Colonies: Jonathan Edwards

"Political prosperity requires the general practice of a strict morality. But this cannot be so well secured by any other means, as by a belief of Christianity...The civil magistrate does not pretend to reward virtue in general according to its moral excellency. He does indeed reward some particular acts of virtue, which are highly beneficial to the public."



Image pulled from: neh.gov

Conditions for Independence

Self-Government



Image from History.com

- Self-government requires a people committed to civic and moral virtue.
- Religion was the inculcator for virtue.
- Christian principle of covenant with God reflected in Locke's social compact theory.



Civics Literacy Excellence Initiative



Colonial Demographics

The Maryland Toleration Act

“...noe person or persons ...professing to beleive in Jesus Christ, shall from henceforth bee any waies troubled...in respect of his or her religion nor in the free exercise thereof within this Province or the Islands...”

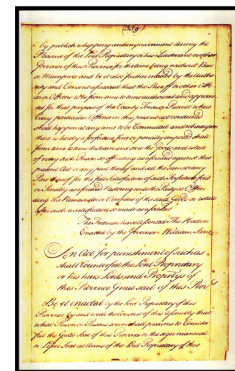


Image from Maryland State Archives

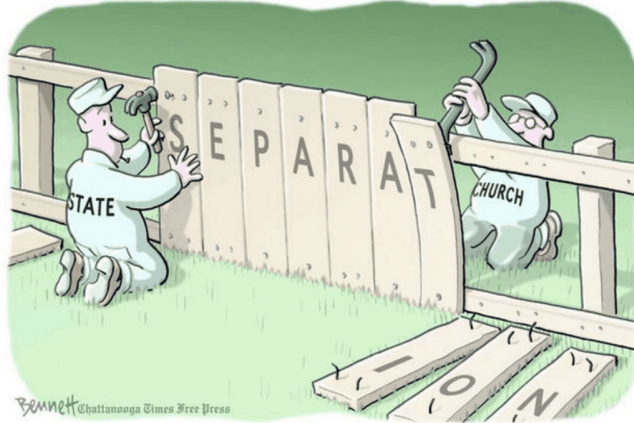


Civics Literacy Excellence Initiative



Session Purpose:

Articulate the Founders' view of Separation of Church and State and their view of Religious Liberty.



Pulled from: PennLive.com

Disestablishment

- Elected officials supported and favored Christianity.



Image pulled from: churchstore.com

Understanding When the Founders' Original Intent Began to Change

- Everson v. Board of Education (1947).
- Engel v. Vitale (1962).
- American Legion v American Humanist Association (2019).



Civics Literacy Excellence Initiative



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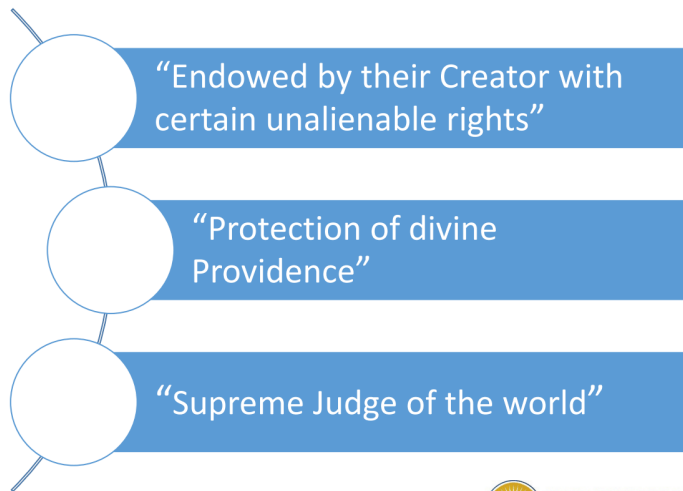
Where Do Rights Come From?



Images from Pixabay



Civics Literacy Excellence Initiative



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