SCENARIOS IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL: DID THE TEACHER GO TOO FAR?

ASSOCIATION OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATOR PREPARATION PROGRAMS
PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY
SEPTEMBER 29, 2007

Sam Stewart, Assistant Professor
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Abilene Christian University
Introduction

Living and sharing your faith with your students is often a controversial issue. Given the legal standards coupled with your desire as a Christian to share your faith with your students, decide whether or not the teacher in the following scenarios went too far in his efforts to share his faith with his students in a public school setting.

Scenarios in the Public School: Did the Teacher Go Too Far?
First Amendment to the United States Constitution provides that:

“Congress make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”
Religion in Public Schools: Legal Standards

State Statute provides:
“Partisan, sectarian, or denominational doctrines may not be advocated in a public school during the hours school is in session…”
School District Policy states:

“While District staff members are generally prohibited from engaging in partisan or religious activity in the workplace during regular work hours and while on official duty, they are entitled to express their personal views or opinions on political, religious and other matters providing this expression does not interfere with the rights of others, cause disruptions in the workplace, or extend into areas utilized by students...”
Matthew 28: 18-19: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you…”

Matthew 6:24 “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”
Matthew 5: 15 “Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.”

2 Timothy 1:8 “So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord…”
Scenario 1: Praying and Discussing Religion with Students

Before school the teacher prays and talks with students about his faith in Christ.

- Is this acceptable by your personal standards?
- Is this acceptable by legal standards?
- Will you pray or speak with students about your faith?
Scenario 2: Letter to Jesus Writing Prompt

The teacher assigns a writing prompt for the students to write a “letter to Jesus.”

Is this acceptable by your personal standards?

Is this acceptable by legal standards?

Would it make a difference if the students were high school students?
Scenario 3: Psalm/Proverb for Daily Oral Language

The teacher writes a “Christian” psalm on the blackboard as a basis for a daily oral language exercise.

Is this acceptable by your personal standards?

Is this acceptable by legal standards?

Is this something that you may do in your classroom?
Scenario 4: Christian Radio and Songs in the Classroom

The teacher regularly sings Christian songs to his students and tunes a radio in his classroom to a Christian radio station with students present.

Is this acceptable by your personal standards?

Is this acceptable by legal standards?

Is this something that you may do in your classroom?
Scenario 5: Ancient Civilization Bible Family Tree Project

The teacher assigns a project that requires students to research the family trees of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In addition the teacher uses Biblical quotes when instructing his Ancient Civilization class.

Is this acceptable by your personal standards?

Is this acceptable by legal standards?

Is this something that you may do in your classroom?
The teacher uses as a sample journal entry entitled “Dear Jesus.” The sample is a highly personal entry about the teacher’s walk with Jesus.

Is this acceptable by your personal standards?

Is this acceptable by legal standards?

Is this something that you may do in your classroom?
Scenario 7: Social Studies Assignment

The teacher uses a sample paragraph for students that refers to the American victory in the American Revolution being a result of God’s blessing and intervention.

Is this acceptable by legal standards?

Is this acceptable by your personal standards?

Is this something that you may do in your classroom?
Scenario 8: Bibles in the Classroom

The teacher places Bibles around the classroom where students can easily access them throughout the day.

Is this acceptable by legal standards?

Is this acceptable by your personal standards?

Is this something that you may do in your classroom?
Scenario 9: Report Card

The teacher writes “God Bless You” on a student’s report card.

Is this acceptable by your personal standards?

Is this acceptable by legal standards?

Is this something that you may do in your classroom?

Scenarios in the Public School: Did the Teacher Go Too Far?
Scenario 10: Bible Christmas Story

The teacher reads the Bible Christmas Story from Luke to his class. The story is read due to student questions about the background of a Christmas story about a church Christmas pageant, “The Best Christmas Story Ever”.

Is this acceptable by your personal standards?

Is this acceptable by legal standards?

Is this something that you may do in your classroom?
Scenario 11:
Religious Activity in the Teachers’ Lounge

The teacher talks with a fellow teacher about his faith. She is offended. In addition other teachers complain about his non-silent prayers and the playing of Christian lyrics in the lounge.

Is this acceptable by legal standards?

Is this acceptable by your personal standards?

Is this something that you may do in your school's teacher lounge?
Scenario 12: Teacher Prayer Meetings

The teacher regularly participates with other teachers in religious meetings before school in a classroom at the school.

Is this acceptable by your personal standards?

Is this acceptable by legal standards?

Is this something that you may do in your classroom?

Scenarios in the Public School: Did the Teacher Go Too Far?
Final Scenario:
Teacher is Accused Of All the Above

You are the teacher and you are charged with all the scenarios. You committed each act as alleged. You are called before a disciplinary committee to answer charges concerning each scenario. Your teaching certificate may be revoked if found guilty. Will you:

- Get an attorney to help with your defense?
- Admit to the allegations?
- Testify that you can't recall the situation or that you didn't commit the acts of which you are accused?
Conclusion

Serving students as a public school teacher is a great service to students and the community. As a Christian and a public school teacher you will encounter situations where your duty as a public school teacher to stay neutral on matters of religion is in conflict with your desire to spread the Good News and to stand up for Jesus.

Just as Paul advises Timothy; “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15, NIV)