

# How to Minister to Public School Families in Your Church

By Eric Buehrer, president of Gateways to Better Education

**M**ost likely, the percentage of public school families in your church will range from 100 percent to 75 percent. These students spend 35 hours per week in public school and only 2 or 3 hours in your church.

A growing number of churches are reaching out to their local schools with various service projects. These include supplying underprivileged students with backpacks, giving crates of school supplies to teachers, and volunteers from the church performing clean up projects on Saturdays. These are all good, but what can your church do to influence what students are taught in class about the Bible and Christianity? How can the church help public school students develop strong character and a desire to preserve and promote America's Judeo-Christian values when they graduate?

54,000,000  
Students in  
K-12 Schools

90% in  
Public School

10% in Private School

Of the 5.3 million private school students, only 730,000 (14%) are in conservative Christian schools. This is a 22% decline from 937,000 in 2001.

## What Public School Educators Need

Besides giving school supplies to teachers, we need to give them the truth. Too many educators have the false assumption that teaching about the Bible and Christianity is forbidden and expressions of faith cannot be allowed in class.



The truth is quite different, and the truth will set them free to help students develop better.

For example, many educators are surprised to discover that their state's academic standards provide ample opportunity for them to teach about the Bible, Christian beliefs, and Christians who were influential in history. For instance, in **California**, sixth grade students are expected to:

“Note the origins of Christianity in the Jewish Messianic prophecies, the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth as described in the New Testament, and the contribution of St. Paul the Apostle to the definition and spread of Christian beliefs (e.g., belief in the Trinity, resurrection, **salvation**).”

In **Tennessee**, sixth graders are expected to:

“Describe the monotheistic religion of the Israelites, including: the belief in one God (monotheism), **the Ten Commandments**, the emphasis on individual worth and personal responsibility, the belief that all people must adhere to the same moral obligations, whether ruler or ruled, the Torah and the Hebrew Bible as part of the history of early Israel.”

However, even though a state's academic standard provides educators with specific guidelines for teaching these topics, educators are too often uninformed about the specific standard (opting to teach only what is in the textbook) or are afraid to give the topic much time or attention for fear of being accused of endorsing a particular religious belief.

To help you meet the needs of families in your church and across your community, Gateways to Better Education offers a half-day professional development



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seminar for the educators in your schools. It gives them the confidence they need and the practical strategies they can use to make their classrooms faith-friendly places where students feel free to express their faith and where they learn about the importance of the Bible and Christianity as they relate to history, culture, and values.

Based on post-event surveys, public school teachers who attend the seminar indicate they will improve their classroom teaching as follows:

- 78% will teach more about Christianity, the Bible, and America's religious heritage
- 87% will tell what "one nation under God" means in the Pledge of Allegiance
- 80% will discuss the religious aspects of holidays
- 74% will encourage students to include their faith-based values in their decision making
- 57% will add a Bible to their classroom library

Your church can be influential in improving the faith-friendliness of your schools as well as what is taught there. To read more about the seminar, visit [www.GoGateways.org/host-event](http://www.GoGateways.org/host-event).

### What Parents Need

Parents want to know that their children's faith will not be undermined or discriminated against. They need to know how to approach a teacher when they have a problem and how to equip their children to be confident Christians in class. Parents need to engage in what I call "relational activism." There is a time and place for political and legal activism, but Christian parents need to see their connections with educators and administrators as divinely appointed opportunities to bless those around them with the truth. We are called to be salt and light, but we use salt to make things better, not bitter. And the light we give should be as a lamp, not a blow torch.

Blessing educators at school with the truth includes helping them understand the fact that:

- The U.S. Department of Education supports students' freedom of religious expression in class
- It is legal to sing religious Christmas carols at school
- State academic standards support teaching about the Bible and Christianity
- The Supreme Court endorses studying the Bible in public schools

Many educators would be relieved to learn that they can make their schools more faith-friendly places and parents in your congregation can be the bearers of this good news. Gateways to Better Education has materials that parents can give to educators that will help them move from fear and confusion to freedom and confidence. Parents don't need to be the experts; they can be the couriers of good news. (Visit [www.GoGateways.org](http://www.GoGateways.org))

## Being a Lamp, not a Blow Torch

Here is a practical three-step approach we teach in our parent seminar for discussing a questionable classroom activity with a teacher and maintaining a positive relationship.

1. Start the conversation by using the phrase "Help me understand..." For example, if you are concerned about a particular reading assignment, you might start by saying, "Help me understand why you chose this book for the students to read." At this point in the conversation you want clarification.
2. Affirm what the teacher is trying to do in general. There is bound to be something on which you can agree. For example, you might appreciate that the teacher wants the students to learn about the environment, but you are concerned about the particular bias of the book she is using. At this point in the conversation, don't jump to explaining your concerns. Finding "common ground" is an important part of the discussion.
3. Transition to your concern by using the phrase, "But have you considered...." Don't assume the teacher will oppose you. In fact, it is better to assume the teacher will agree with you once you explain your concern. Having that assumption will help you avoid expressing an adversarial tone.

### Casting Vision

Monday through Friday the "arms" of your church reach into many schools where there are hundreds, and possibly even thousands, of children as well as educators and parents. You don't need to be the expert about public education. Gateways stands ready to come along side you to equip them to be salt and light. Whether it is our materials that parents can pass along to educators and students, or it is our seminars for parents and educators, we can help you equip the saints for the work of the ministry in your local public schools. ■

For advice regarding your schools and for more information on bringing Gateways' seminars to your community, call (800) 929-1163.



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*Keeping God in our schools*

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