

THE BIBLE AND MS. WRIGHT

L laurel Palm Middle School has a reputation as one of the most successful schools in Dayton. For the last three years, the school has been awarded a National Distinguished School Award, and it has been identified by the state as one of the top 10 performing schools. With a population of 1,500 students and a multicultural student body, the administration, teachers, and students have been recognized for their united front in celebrating teaching and learning and inviting parents to play an active role in planning school programs and improving all aspects of the school and its operations.

Nestled between the Jonathan Ode Community Cultural Center, named after the city's founder, and the high school and recognized for its high percentage of students attending four-year universities following graduation, Laurel Palm Middle School was considered a model school.

The Problem

Ms. Eleanor Avery, the principal of Laurel Palm Middle School, has a reputation for leading her staff with an innovative and supportive style that motivates the faculty and creates an environment where new ideas are encouraged and innovative programs are supported. She has served as a school administrator for over a decade and she has the support of her teachers, parents, and students.

Each school year, Ms Avery establishes specific curriculum goals and objectives that align with the school district. In addition, she has formed a school site committee that she has charged with developing new and interesting curriculum programs.

In the past the committee has been successful and has proposed new ideas, such as improving the science curriculum and developing a continuum for learning in math and literature. In each case, the district has supported the programs and, with minor changes, adopted the programs districtwide for the middle schools in the school district.

For the current school year, one of the parents on the committee, Ms. Beckel, made the suggestion that a religious studies course would be an interesting addition to the current curriculum program. She had learned that other schools in various campuses throughout the state were including courses on religion in their curriculum, and she received support from the rest of the committee, including Ms. Avery.

Ms. Beckel and Ms. Cassidy, a classroom teacher who also served on the committee, were planning on presenting the new religious studies course at the next school site meeting after they had included suggestions from all the committee members and prepared the final document. Included in the program proposal was a textbook recommendation that listed the Bible as one of the references to be used for the religious studies course.

Prior to the school site meeting where the new religious studies curriculum program was to be formally presented to the school site committee, Ms. Beckel invited her neighbor, Ms. Wright, to her home for coffee. During the visit, Ms. Wright learned from Ms. Beckel about the upcoming plans to present the religious studies curriculum, including using the Bible as one of the texts for the course.

Ms. Wright had no children of her own, but she always showed an interest in Ms. Beckel's involvement with the middle school. Over the years, Ms. Wright had even elected to volunteer at Laurel Palm Middle School's annual fund-raising events.

As Ms. Beckel and Ms. Wright concluded their conversation, Ms. Wright said, "You know I have been a supporter of the middle school, and I have even volunteered to help at the annual fund-raisers over the years, and I consider you my friend, but if you think that I will stand by and let you and your committee introduce the Bible as a textbook, you are mistaken. I have always

believed in separation of church and state, and this idea crosses a boundary. And I for one will not support it.”

Ms. Beckel was surprised by Ms. Wright’s reaction. She replied, “I don’t understand your comment. The Bible is a piece of literature that clearly explains the foundation of a belief of one religion. The religious studies program is going to include numerous religious references, including the Koran. What is the big deal?”

Ms. Wright left Ms. Beckel’s home and offered the following response, “You have not heard the end of this. I have known you for many years and I have not shared my personal views on this topic because there was no need, but you must know that even though we are friends, I will not stand by and see this type of curriculum introduced in the school—and especially the use of the Bible.” With that said, Ms. Wright left.

Ms. Beckel assumed that even though Ms. Wright was upset, she would not hear from her again on the subject. This was to be the first of many assumptions that Ms. Beckel would make that would prove to be wrong.

The following week, at the school site meeting, Ms. Beckel and Ms. Cassidy presented the religious studies curriculum program to Ms. Avery and the committee. Ms. Avery accepted the program proposal and planned on presenting the proposal at the next school board meeting, which was scheduled for the following week.

When Ms. Avery, Ms. Beckel, and Ms. Cassidy arrived at the school board meeting the following week to make their presentation, there to greet them were the local media and Ms. Wright, who was waving a large sign that read, “Save our children. Separate church from state. Save the Constitution.”

Assume for this case that you are Ms. Avery, the principal of Laurel Palm Middle School.

Case Analysis Framework

1. Summarize the case.
2. Identify the problem in a single sentence.
3. Select specific information from the case and categorize it according to people, place, or program.
4. Review and prioritize the information.
5. Refer to the data in each category to solve the problem identified in the case and to respond to the case study questions.

Questions to Research and Consider

1. As the school site principal, do you believe that a committee of parents and teachers is qualified to develop curriculum programs for the school? Why or why not?
2. Should Ms. Beckel have told you that her neighbor reacted as she did with the news about using the Bible as a reference for the course? What would you have done if you would have found out?
3. Do you believe that Ms. Wright has a right to her opinion? Why or why not?
4. What would you have done when you arrived at the school board meeting and were met by Ms. Wright and the media?
5. Do you believe as the school principal you were obligated to inform the superintendent of the details of the curriculum program prior to the school board meeting? Should you have informed anyone else other than the superintendent at the school district?
6. As the principal, what could you have done to avoid the scene at the school board meeting?
7. What precautions if any, would you have taken to discourage the media from attending the meeting?
8. What documents, if any, would you refer to that would justify using the Bible as a reference for the religious studies course?
9. What would you do in the future to work with the committee to make certain that this type of incident would not happen again?
10. Do you believe that your reputation as an excellent school administrator would help you to persuade the school board to implement the religious studies course including using the Bible as one of the texts?

Developing Your Leadership Expertise: ISLLC Standards 5 & 6

Research the subject of separation of church and state as it applies to school curricula and write a position paper to support or reject the use of the Bible in school as a reference text for a religious studies course. Be prepared to defend your position.