



LIFEWISE ACADEMY



**WHAT EDUCATORS NEED TO KNOW
ABOUT THE GROUNDBREAKING RELEASED TIME PROGRAM**

A PERSONAL NOTE TO EDUCATORS

Dear Educator,

You are a hero!

As a former college football player (Go Buckeyes!), I have traveled the nation, speaking in public schools on character development and interacting with thousands of educators who described for me the unique and ever intensifying challenge you face. After my presentations, principals and teachers would often share the same thing with me, almost word for word. "You know Joel, these days it's not enough to simply educate students. You have to be their parent as well." With the continuous pressure of personnel and budget strains, educators everywhere face the same challenge: do more with less.

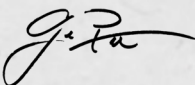
But I think there may be some allies in your community who can come alongside you.

When I wasn't speaking in schools, I often spoke in churches. Churchgoers were consistently enthusiastic about my work with students and would often share stories with me of their own work in their local public schools. However, over time, I noticed a trend. More and more, these stories were reports from the past instead of current efforts. Churchgoers still longed to serve students in their community, teaching them the biblical principles that had shaped their own lives. But they would confess that, with the way school policies have changed over time, they didn't know where to begin.

Not long ago, I was introduced to a solution that can address both problems. Released Time Religious Instruction (RTRI) offers schools the support and influence they need, without further taxing their already strained resources, and provides community members a clear, effective and legal way to engage with their local schools. Now with the arrival of LifeWise Academy, it is easier than ever to bring these benefits to your students, your school, and your community.

I hope you'll find the contents of this booklet informative and helpful as you seek to better serve your students. Thank you for all you do!

Sincerely,



Joel Penton
Executive Director

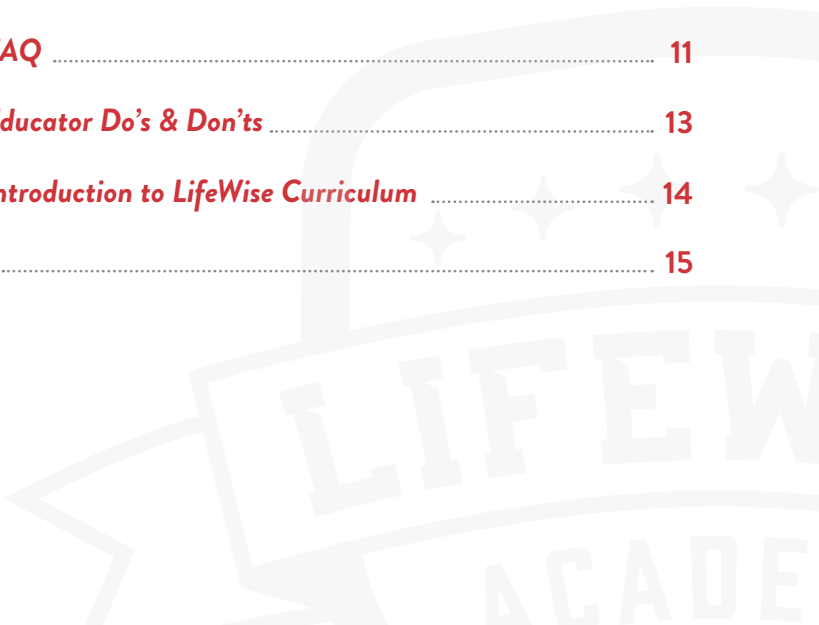
LifeWise Academy



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INTRODUCTION TO RTRI

What is Released Time Religious Instruction?

Released Time Religious Instruction (RTRI) programs allow students to be released during the school day to receive religious instruction at an **off-campus location**. Students participate **voluntarily** and **with parental permission**, while non-participating students remain in class.¹

What is LifeWise Academy?

LifeWise Academy is an innovative RTRI program now being introduced around the country which offers clear and unique benefits to schools and communities. First, LifeWise Academy includes a character education component: Each lesson introduces a specific character trait that students are encouraged to apply in their school, their families, and their community. Second, the LifeWise Academy model is both **replicable and flexible**. Each local program operates with a standard set of policies, procedures, and curriculum which is easily adapted for a variety of community and district needs. At the same time, the LifeWise Support Center, available to assist all locations, ensures quality and reliability across locations.

How does LifeWise Academy work?

We Keep it Legal - LifeWise Academy is diligent to adhere to relevant laws and policies. (See “The Legality of RTRI” on page 2.)

We Keep it Simple - LifeWise Academy focuses on the central messages of the Bible. We avoid getting bogged down in the finer points of religious doctrine. Instead, **we focus on the most foundational themes that speak to the issues common to all people.**

We Keep it Practical - LifeWise Academy seeks to create real and lasting change for students, schools, and communities so we continually look for ways to make instruction **not only conceptual, but also actionable.**



Released Time helped our students learn respect and kindness for others in a world urgently needing these values.

BETH PEUGH

Retired Elementary School Principal

THE LEGALITY OF RTRI

The greatest concern for most educators: Is this legal? The answer is an unequivocal, “Yes!” Based on the 1952 Supreme Court case, *Zorach v. Clauson*, RTRI programs in the United States are completely legal in all fifty states.²

At the same time, the specifics of state policies vary. Many states have passed laws to give additional direction to RTRI programs. In some states, RTRI can be offered for credit at the high school level. But even in states where no specific law exists, individual districts are typically free to work with RTRI programs in their community when three general criteria are met:

1 VOLUNTARY

Parents must give permission for their students to participate in LifeWise Academy.

2 OFF CAMPUS

The LifeWise Academy program must be held off school grounds.

3 PRIVATELY FUNDED

No taxpayer money can go to support or run the LifeWise Academy program.³

THE BENEFITS OF RTRI

RTRI has been part of the American educational landscape for nearly one hundred years.⁴ In that time, the benefits of these programs have been clear and consistent, especially in the areas of **character development, mental health, academic performance, and family & community involvement.**



**CHARACTER
DEVELOPMENT**



**MENTAL
HEALTH**



**ACADEMIC
PERFORMANCE**



**FAMILY & COMMUNITY
INVOLVEMENT**



CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Participating in religious activities, including an RTRI program, can and does positively impact students' character and choices.

First, by studying the Bible's narratives and teachings, students explore "themes that support positive character development that can lay a strong foundation for healthy and moral behavior through adolescence and adulthood."⁵ As they discover a worldview which includes a personal, loving deity, students learn to make wise choices both inside and outside the RTRI classroom.

In an RTRI program in Oakland, CA, for example, students "use[d] what they learn from the program in their everyday experiences, including manners, pledges, morals (i.e., staying away from drugs/alcohol and treating others well), as well as many of the 10 Commandments (i.e., thou shall honor thy mother/father, thou shall not steal, commit adultery, kill, etc.)."⁶

The positive impact on character and choices is particularly apparent in behaviors such as alcohol and drug abuse. The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University reported that "rates of drug and alcohol abuse have been found to be significantly lower in those who are religious compared to their nonreligious counterparts."⁷

And another survey of literature found that "the research is almost unanimous in reporting that religious persons are less likely to abuse alcohol or take illicit drugs. [O]ver half of the 76 studies ... concerned ... adolescents and young persons."⁸



Rates of drug and alcohol abuse have been found to be significantly lower in those who are religious compared to their nonreligious counterparts.

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse

Additionally, RTRI programs help students develop good character by connecting them to mentors who both teach and model the positive character traits that students need to succeed in the world. Especially in communities with high rates of poverty or crime, these positive adult mentors can be a powerful influence in the students' lives, reminding the students of what they've learned and helping them apply those lessons at school, in their families and in the community.⁹

Of course, character development is never as simple as reading a book, even the Bible. No RTRI program will result in perfect character in any (or every) student. However, there is an unmistakable correlation between religion and character: Students who participate in religious activities generally also display good character.



MENTAL HEALTH

The decline of mental health among America's youth is another significant reality for educators as nearly twenty percent of school-age students are dealing with some form of mental health issue.¹⁰

While educators have access to a variety of resources to support students' mental health, they can be expensive or insufficient. Meanwhile, decades of research indicates a clear, positive link between religious activity and mental health.

In their survey of literature, Koenig & Larson reported a consistent, positive correlation between religiosity and mental health.

- ✦ “Nearly 80% [of studies] found religious beliefs and practices consistently related to greater life satisfaction, happiness, positive affect, and higher morale.”
- ✦ “84% [of studies] found lower rates of suicide or more negative attitudes toward suicide among the more religious.”
- ✦ And a small majority of studies “found lower levels of anxiety or fear among the more religious.”

NEARLY

80%

found religious beliefs and practices consistently related to greater life satisfaction, happiness, positive affect, and higher morale.

They conclude: “Religious beliefs and practices rooted within established religious traditions are generally associated with better mental health, higher social functioning, and fewer self-destructive tendencies.”¹¹

Another study published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* reached a similar conclusion:

- ✦ “In general, adolescents who have higher levels of spirituality and religiosity fare better than their less religious or spiritual peers—they have lower rates of risky health behaviors and fewer mental health problems and utilize spiritual coping to manage physical illness—even when controlling for other relevant demographic variables.”
- ✦ “Wright and co-authors found that spirituality, defined as the importance of religion in understanding one’s meaning of life, and the role of religious beliefs in one’s interactions in life, were directly associated with lower levels of depressive symptoms in adolescents.”¹²

Finally, Weber and Pargament concluded: “Research has shown that religion and spirituality are generally associated with better mental health. ... Greater religion or spirituality has been associated with lower levels of depressive symptoms, fewer symptoms of posttraumatic stress, fewer eating disorder symptoms, fewer negative symptoms in schizophrenia, less perceived stress, lower risk of suicide, and less personality disorder. Additionally, a higher level of certainty in one’s belief system is associated with greater psychological health.”¹³

The research is abundantly clear. Religious activity can positively affect a student’s mental health. Thus, an RTRI program can be a valuable option to increase support for mental health while placing no additional financial or staffing burdens on the schools.



ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Some have argued that RTRI programs hurt students' academic performance, claiming that released time prevents teachers from covering material effectively, cuts learning time for every student and causes participating students to fall behind their classmates.¹⁴

Certainly, if an RTRI program does hurt academic outcomes, it would be difficult to justify its presence. However, both research and practice have shown that such concerns are unfounded. As one study concludes, "No empirical evidence exists to support the notion that released time participation impedes academic performance."¹⁵

Instead, students seem to gain significant academic benefits when religious instruction is offered in conjunction with their regular academic pursuits.

First, RTRI instructors reinforce "the importance of the educational enterprise" and "the value of learning."¹⁶ In fact, Wood noted that, for black male students in particular, "spirituality ... allowed students to better navigate and negotiate their educational experiences."¹⁷

Second, RTRI classrooms support traditional learning outcomes. "Language-based activities are generally a central component of released time. Engaging in such practices with content that is viewed as intrinsically meaningful may enhance English skills."¹⁸ The Oakland program was commended for including "reading aloud, role play, and art" which are "promising strategies for addressing literacy problems."¹⁹

Test results support this claim. Students in the Oakland program performed as well as, or better than, their non-participating classmates on various literacy components such as comprehension.²⁰ Hodge indicated that "Latino students who took part in released time fared equally well on high-stakes, standardized tests relative to their matched peers. [N]o significant difference emerged between released time participants and their matched peers on English and math test scores."²¹

Finally, an RTRI program may help address the education achievement gap. William Jaynes noted, "Of all the variables included as potentially bridging the achievement gap, religious faith [whether personal, school-based, or a character-based curriculum] was the one that produced the largest effect size."²² He concluded that "religious faith can reduce the achievement gap by more than 50%."²³ Other researchers have reported similar results.^{24,25}

Religious faith can reduce the achievement gap by

**MORE
THAN 50%**

In light of the positive impact an RTRI program may have on students' academic performance, Jeynes, in particular, recommends that schools do more to “[incorporate] the strength that factors beyond the school confines can provide. The results of this study suggest that the religious faith of students may be such a source of strength.”²⁶



FAMILY & COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Finally, RTRI programs can provide school districts with a practical and effective method by which to attract strong families in their communities.

A growing number of families are choosing alternative options such as open enrollment, charter or private schools, and homeschooling. Currently, nearly 10% of American students attend private schools²⁷ and as many as 3.4% are homeschooled.²⁸

For the school districts, falling enrollment means the loss of important resources, including funding. Fewer students results in lower budgets, which further prevent the district from providing the best educational options and support to its students.

But money is not the only resource that is lost by falling enrollment. As students choose other educational options, districts also lose the influence of engaged and invested families. And such partnerships are invaluable to seeing schools and students reach their ultimate potential.

According to “Parent, Family, Community Involvement in Education,” an NEA policy brief, “Parent, family, and community involvement in education correlates with higher academic performance and school improvement.” In fact, the NEA reports, “Research and field work show that parent-school-partnerships improve schools, strengthen families, build community support, and increase student achievement and success.”²⁹

Unfortunately, it is often the families who are most likely to actively support and invest in their local schools who choose to place their students in private schools or to educate them at home. As a result, schools are constantly looking for ways to engage with and retain these families and their students.

Not surprisingly, for many of the families who choose private school or homeschool, religious instruction is an important criteria, one that public schools struggle to meet. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 78% of private schools are religious in nature,³⁰ and many homeschooling parents specifically stated that they chose to homeschool in order to provide religious instruction to their children.³¹

Thus a public school with a local RTRI program could attract strong families who may otherwise opt out of public education for religious reasons. While public schools cannot legally endorse any religious teaching or denomination, cooperating with a community-led RTRI program could provide incentive for these families to keep their students and influence in the public schools.

This is Jaynes’ recommendation: “It would appear to be wise to support policies that are supportive of strong families and personal religious faith,”³² including a local RTRI program.

A public school with a local RTRI program could attract strong families who may otherwise opt out of public education for religious reasons.

CONCLUSION



Built on strong parent-community-school partnerships, RTRI programs provide obvious, measurable benefits without further straining a district’s budget or resources. LifeWise Academy, in particular, offers an innovative and effective path to reap those benefits for your students and your school.

Cooperating with a local LifeWise effort is the first step. In fact, “Given that all costs are absorbed by outside entities, school districts appear to have little to lose and perhaps much to gain by working with community actors to support released time programs.”³³



FAQ

Q: Does LifeWise Academy interfere with classes during the school day?

A: No. While classes are held during the school day, they do not interfere with mandatory courses or extracurricular activities. The class schedule is set by school personnel in consultation with LifeWise Academy representatives. Usually LifeWise Academy classes are scheduled for times when other elective courses are offered.

Q: How do LifeWise Academy classes fit into the school schedule?

A: The schedule varies greatly from school to school depending on a variety of factors. Most elementary schools integrate released time into their weekly specials rotation, providing students the option to attend LifeWise Academy or library, technology, or intervention time.

Q: How is LifeWise Academy promoted to parents/students?

A: If permissible, announcements, permission slips, or other informational materials about LifeWise Academy can be sent home through the school. For districts which do not permit non-school material to be sent home, the program can be promoted through social media, news media, church networks, and word of mouth. Legally, schools may not use class time or assemblies during the school day to promote released time programs.

Q: How much does LifeWise Academy cost?

A: LifeWise Academy is 100% privately funded through donations. There is no cost to schools or participating families.

Q: Is LifeWise Academy associated with any religious doctrine or church?

A: LifeWise Academy is a Christian ministry but unaffiliated with any particular church denomination.

Q: Why should students, even those without a Christian background, learn about the Bible?

A: LifeWise Academy recognizes that the Bible was foundational to the forming of our western culture and societal ethics. We believe all students, regardless of religious background, can benefit from a greater understanding of such an influential book.

Q: Are LifeWise Academy classes held on school property?

A: No, all classes must be held off school property.

Q: How will students get to the off-site location? Where will they meet?

A: Students will either walk under the supervision of volunteer chaperones or be driven by bus or vans to the offsite location. Locations can include churches, community centers, dedicated LifeWise Academy buildings or other facilities.

Q: How do you ensure that students are safe before, during and after each class? Will the attendance of students be reported to the school?

A: Attendance is taken before leaving the school property and strict safety guidelines are enforced during class time including but not limited to the presence of two adults in the classroom at all times.

Q: Who is responsible for teaching the students? How are they trained, certified or hired?

A: Teachers are vetted and hired by local LifeWise Academy leadership. Teaching certification is preferred but not required by law or LifeWise Academy policy. Local leadership teams determine whether to hire paid or volunteer teachers.

Q: Who assumes liability for students during LifeWise classes?

A: From the time students leave school property, LifeWise assumes liability and maintains an umbrella liability insurance policy for this reason.

DO'S & DON'TS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS



Do educate yourself.

This packet provides introductory content to RTRI programs in general and LifeWise Academy in particular. By reviewing its contents, as well as exploring other available resources about RTRI, you will be well equipped to interact effectively with district and community leaders. More information is available at ReleasedTime.org and LifeWiseAcademy.org.



Do coordinate with LifeWise personnel.

The LifeWise Leadership Team in your local community is available and equipped to answer your questions and provide you with the necessary information to create an effective and long-term relationship. LifeWise personnel have both the experience and the resources to help you navigate the logistics and communication of establishing a LifeWise Academy for your students.

Don't overtly promote or discourage LifeWise Academy.

The goal of LifeWise Academy is to foster parent-community-school partnerships which are both legal and effective. In order to protect the separation of church and state, the school and its administration cannot actively promote or discourage families and students from participating in an RTRI program, but by working with the local LifeWise Leadership Team, they can reap the many benefits LifeWise Academy provides.

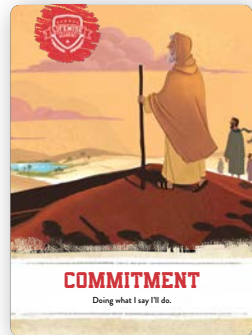
INTRODUCTION TO LEWISWIS CURRICULUM

LifeWise Academy is unique among RTRI programs because it integrates character education and Bible lessons into a single packet. Its curriculum is both religious and academic in nature.

Each week, students will interact with a story from the Bible through games, worksheets, Big Idea questions, and review activities. In addition, every week's lesson is tied directly to a character trait that students are challenged to apply in practical ways in school, at home, and in the community.

Year One Weekly Lessons

- ✦ **Gratitude** (God Created the World)
- ✦ **Respect** (God Created People)
- ✦ **Obedience** (Sin Entered the World)
- ✦ **Responsibility** (Cain and Abel)
- ✦ **Patience** (Noah and the Ark)
- ✦ **Humility** (The Tower of Babel)
- ✦ **Courage** (God's Covenant with Abraham)
- ✦ **Sacrifice** (God Tested Abraham)
- ✦ **Trustworthiness** (The Promise Reaffirmed)
- ✦ **Generosity** (The Stolen Blessing)
- ✦ **Determination** (Jacob's New Name)
- ✦ **Perseverance** (Joseph Sent to Egypt)
- ✦ **Forgiveness** (Joseph's Dreams Came True)
- ✦ **Joy** (Jesus Was Born)
- ✦ **Compassion** (Moses Was Born and Called)
- ✦ **Reliability** (The Plagues, Passover, and Red Sea Crossing)
- ✦ **Contentment** (The Wilderness Test)
- ✦ **Truthfulness** (The Golden Calf)
- ✦ **Honor** (The Ten Commandments: Love God)
- ✦ **Justice** (The Ten Commandments: Love Others)
- ✦ **Enthusiasm** (The Tabernacle Was Built)
- ✦ **Initiative** (God Gave Rules For Sacrifice)
- ✦ **Submission** (Worship Only God)
- ✦ **Commitment** (God Reminded His People of His Covenant)
- ✦ **Love** (Jesus's Death and Resurrection)



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ABOUT LIFEWISE ACADEMY

The LifeWise Academy mission is “to positively impact students, schools and communities by providing a Bible-based, character-focused Released Time Religious Instruction (RTRI) program.”

RTRI is a legal program by which religious instruction is accessible to public school students during the school day allowing them to leave school (with parental permission) to attend off-site classes which are both academic and religious in nature.

