

RYAN WALTERS AND THE BIBLE

Oklahoma Superintendant and the Separation of Church and State

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ABSTRACT

In the Summer of 2024, Oklahoma Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters issued guidelines requiring a religious curriculum for all schools in Oklahoma. These guidelines include Biblical passages, the Ten Commandments and the analysis of biblical stories and art.

Following the announcement of this mandate, public school teachers, parents, lawmakers and religious leaders expressed outrage at his plan and curriculum. The main concern around the case is that it blurs the lines of constitutional freedom of religion and federal dollars being poured into schools. Walters argues that the Bible serves as historical data that students should learn to gain a broader understanding of the world's history.

This ongoing case examines how Walters' personal views and outspoken beliefs have impacted public education in the state of Oklahoma. This is important because the proposal presents significant issues for not only Oklahoma but the whole country as similar projects emerge in education. It highlights a dilemma that has grown prominent in recent years: Is the separation of church and state truly protected by the constitution?

BACKGROUND

WHO IS RYAN WALTERS

Formerly a high school teacher in Oklahoma, Ryan Walters taught for eight years in his hometown at McAlester High School (MHS). At MHS, Walters taught Advanced Placement (AP) courses in World History, U.S. History and U.S. Government. He also taught on-level history classes, special education classes and Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) classes (Oklahoma State Department of Education, n.d.).

In September 2020, Walters was named the Secretary of Public Education by Governor Kevin Stitt. In this role, his responsibilities included overseeing various agencies, boards, and commissions, including the State Board of Education and the Office of Educational Quality.

Walters; The Oklahoma State Department of Education (n.d.) refers to Walters as a “lifelong advocate of improving Oklahoma’s education system and helping every student reach their full potential” (Oklahoma State Department of Education, n.d.). He is a proud member of the Republican Party and is well known for his very right-winged views. His infamously strong opinions are heard throughout the state of Oklahoma, with many Republicans in strong disagreement with how he conveys his ideals (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.).

BACKGROUND

OKLAHOMA'S PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

Oklahoma's public education system has faced long-standing challenges, particularly in areas of funding, teacher retention and academic performance. The state ranks below the national average in per-pupil spending, teacher pay and educational outcomes, creating difficulties in providing quality education, especially in rural areas (Oklahoma Policy Institute, 2023).

Due to low wages and high demands, Oklahoma has experienced teacher shortages and high turnover rates, undermining consistency and educational outcomes (Palmer, 2024). Recent initiatives have aimed to mitigate these issues, including teacher pay raises and increased funding, yet disparities in resources persist across school districts (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2024).

The educational landscape in Oklahoma is further complicated by high poverty rates, which disproportionately impact students' learning and achievement (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Efforts to improve educational quality are ongoing, though introducing the religious curriculum in 2024 has sparked new debates over the separation of church and state.

CASE OVERVIEW

THE OKLAHOMA BIBLE MANDATE

In the Summer of 2024, Oklahoma Superintendent Ryan Walters issued guidelines requiring a religious curriculum for all public schools in Oklahoma (Thomason, 2024). This religious curriculum includes biblical passages, the Ten Commandments and analysis of biblical stories and art. Every classroom must also have a physical copy of the Bible, the United States Constitution, the Declaration of Independence and the Ten Commandments in them (Thomason, 2024).

Walters argues that the Bible serves as historical data for students to gain a broader understanding of the world's history (Dias & Mervosh, 2024).

The mandate has been deemed by some as unconstitutional and are concerned about the use of federal dollars being poured into schools. Over 30 Oklahomans, including parents, teachers and faith leaders are suing Walters (ACLU of Oklahoma & Mach, 202). Many large Oklahoma school districts have declined to follow the mandate, citing state academic standards approved by the Legislature which don't include compulsory use of the Bible in classrooms (Evans, 2024).

There is also concern in where the money for this mandates implemetation is coming from. When asked to identify the source of the initial \$3 million earmarked for Bibles, Walters' spokesman, Dan Isett initially evaded the question (Evans, 2024). He then went on to say that he OSDE saved money on staff and administrative costs, and they plan to use those savings for this program (Evans, 2024).

CASE TIMELINE

JUNE 2024 DETAILS.....

ANALYSIS

COMMUNICATION: WALTERS AND THE PUBLIC

Walters' communication concerning this issue has been prideful, stern and occasionally aggressive. He has been communicating with several stakeholder groups publicly, with the main three being the general public, the school districts who oppose his mandate and those taking legal action against him (Smith, 2024). Walters has displayed strong feelings about this situation and is adamant about the enforcement of this mandate claiming it will be nothing but positive for the state of Oklahoma (Thomason, 2024). While his communications have slightly varied, the messaging has been generally consistent.

To the general public, Walters has displayed immense belief in this mandate as something that will be extremely beneficial to the state, describing how “[The residents] are going to be so proud here in Oklahoma to be the first state in the country to bring the Bible back to every single classroom and every state should be doing this....” (Palmer et al., 2024).

He has also reaffirmed his affiliation with the Republican party and his support of Donald Trump stating how “President Trump [has] praised [Oklahoma’s] efforts” and “been the leader on this issue” (Palmer et al., 2024). His confidence in the implementation of the Bible in schools is consistent and prideful with the general public. This is a very different tone than that which he has with those who disagree with him.

ANALYSIS

COMMUNICATION: WALTERS TO OPPOSITION

When addressing districts who oppose, the confidence shifts into a more demanding tone. Some Oklahoma educators have indicated they won't follow the law and Oklahoma's 'standards' (Thomason, 2024). Walters responded to this saying "...let me be clear: they will comply, and I will use every means to make sure of it" (Thomason, 2024). With this forceful language, he also made a statement about consequences teachers who refuse to teach the Bible will face, indicating they could lose their teaching license (Perez, 2024).

Walters' response to the parties suing him has become even more polarizing and aggressive as he's stated that, "Oklahomans will not be bullied by out-of-state, radical leftists who hate the principles our nation was founded upon. The simple fact is that understanding how the Bible has impacted our nation, in its proper historical and literary context, was the norm in America until the 1960s and its removal has coincided with a precipitous decline in American schools. Our students can't understand American history and culture without understanding the Biblical principles from which they came, so I am proud to bring back the Bible to every classroom in Oklahoma" (Rael, 2024).

He reiterated that he will "never back down to the woke mob, no matter what tactic they use to try to intimidate Oklahomans" (Rael, 2024). His comments reflect a broader theme of resistance to perceived cultural and political pressures that those of opposing beliefs are pushing. He further emphasized his confidence in the legality of his actions, stating, "If there is a legal challenge, we'll take it on. We feel very confident in our legal position" (Rael, 2024). His steadfast approach underscores his commitment to pursuing his agenda for Oklahoma's educational system, even in the face of potential legal or societal pushback.

ANALYSIS

WALTERS' SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVITY

A recent report by the Human Rights Campaign (2024) has analyzed Walters' social media activity, specifically on X (formerly known as Twitter).

HRC's analysis of his posts finds that Walters spent his time on X doing little to address student education and instead, attacks everyone from the LGBTQ+ community to Oklahoma teachers unions (Human Rights Campaign, 2024). He has also “pushed for (Christian) prayer in school and spent far more space promoting his own media appearances (appearances he's paid an out of state PR firm to help secure with Oklahoma taxpayer dollars) than school policy and news” (Human Rights Campaign, 2024).

Shoshana Goldberg, Director of Public Education and Research at the Human Rights Campaign stated that “The Human Rights Campaign continues to call for the removal of Ryan Walters from the Oklahoma Department of Education. Walters has significantly harmed the LGBTQ+ community in Oklahoma schools: causing several well-respected professionals to lose their jobs, promoting the content of hate-individual Chaya Raichik and then designating her to serve in the state's department of education, and ultimately participating in the hate speech that led to the attack and eventual death of Nex Benedict in school. Walters cares more about his appearance on social media than about educating children, and must be stopped” (HRC Staff, 2024).

ANALYSIS

WALTERS' SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVITY

According to the report, in the first three months of 2024 Walters posted to X 122 times with a breakdown of content as follows (Human Rights Campaign, 2024):

- Nearly one-third (32.8%) of his posts attacked the LGBTQ+ community
- Nearly another third (32.7%) of his posts attacked either specific teachers, schools, and districts, “teachers unions,” or the U.S. Department of Education
- 19% of his posts either accused others (teachers, “the left”, teachers unions, LGBTQ+ advocates, “woke mob” etc.) of indoctrinating students, or promised to end “indoctrination”
- 23% of his posts praise right wing activists, anti-LGBTQ+ extremist individuals and groups, and arch-conservative groups
- 19% of his posts focus on bringing prayer back to classrooms, the Ten Commandments back to school, and religion and Christian values back to education
- Less than a quarter (23.7%) of his posts were about school instruction proposals, or proposed activities to improve academic performance.

ANALYSIS

COMMUNICATION: MEDIA /PUBLIC RESPONSE

The public's and media's has been outspoken (Thomason, 2024). Quite a few people are upset by this mandate with some calling it "unconstitutional" (Thomason, 2024).

Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president of state-church watchdog group Freedom From Religion Foundation found the situation to be "absurd" stating that "he's just signaling as fast as he can, as loud as he can, that he expects schools to brainwash children in the Christian religion" (Thomason, 2024).

Rachel Laser, the president of Americans United for Separation of Church and State expressed concern stating that "Public schools are not Sunday schools" (Dias & Mervosh, 2024), and that Americans United is "ready to step in and protect all Oklahoma public school children and their families from constitutional violations of their religious freedom" (Dias & Mervosh, 2024).

These groups are a part of the lawsuit and act as the plaintiffs' representatives in the legal case (ACLU of Oklahoma & Mach, 2024).

ANALYSIS

COMMUNICATION: MEDIA /PUBLIC RESPONSE

The reaction of faith leaders and members of the Christian community mirrors those of the opposed public, feeling the bible is being used to push Walters' ideations and agenda (ACLU of Oklahoma & Mach, 2024).

Baptist pastor, Reverend Mitch Randall of Cleveland County spoke out about Walters' agenda and expressed how appalled he was by "the use of the Bible – a sacred text – for Superintendent Walters' political grandstanding" (ACLU of Oklahoma & Mach, 2024).

Devout Christian and parent Erika Wright is one of the plaintiffs in the case and had strong feelings about the mandate (ACLU of Oklahoma & Mach, 2024).

Discussing her reasons for suing she spoke on the already struggling education system that Oklahoma has ACLU of Oklahoma & Mach, 2024). She further reasoned that it is her and her husband's "responsibility to decide how and when [their] children learn about the Bible and religious teachings," emphasizing that while they are "devout Christians" they feel it is "not the role of any politician or public school official to intervene in these personal matters" (ACLU of Oklahoma & Mach, 2024).

IMPLICATIONS

FINANCIAL

With this mandate that requires every school in the state to have a Bible in the classroom, there comes a significant cost.

The request from the State Department of Education was for 55,000 Bibles with criteria that must be met and the department looking for someone to supply this (Palmer et al., 2024).

This bible's very specific requirements are as follows:

- The King James Version
- Contains the Old and New Testaments
- Includes copies of the Pledge of Allegiance, Declaration of Independence, U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights
- Bound in leather or leather-like material

Only one Bible, Lee Greenwood's God Bless the U.S.A. meets this lengthy list of demands.

This Bible, better known as the 'Trump Bible,' costs \$60 a copy and is expected to cost taxpayers \$3.3 million (Palmer et al., 2024). Many are confused as to where the money for this is coming from in the Oklahoma State Department of Education budget (Evans 2024).

IMPLICATIONS

SOCIETAL

In examining the societal implications of mandating a religious curriculum, it becomes evident that this policy holds significant promise and considerable risk. On the one hand, it offers an opportunity to foster a deeper understanding of the values and beliefs that shape our society—encouraging students to appreciate the diversity of thought and practice that exists in America and beyond. On the other hand, students are forced to learn about something that may not align with their views.

Several states have taken steps to engage in this discussion of religious liberty in the classroom. Texas recently passed a bill permitting schools to hire religious counselors, while Florida has implemented a day of prayer in public schools. While the First Amendment guarantees the right to religious freedom, public schools must remain neutral and inclusive (McCreary, 2023). Mandating displays such as the Ten Commandments in classrooms risks prioritizing one religion over others, potentially alienating students of diverse faiths or those who identify as non-religious.

Walters has described not including the Bible as a historical document in the history curriculum as “academic malpractice,” explaining the document as a basis for American leadership and significant moments in the country’s history (CNN, 2024). As states like Oklahoma continue to enforce curricula based on religious teachings, students grow into adults without their perspective of what to believe. Should Walters have his way and successfully mandate a statewide Christian doctrine in Oklahoma schools, students will not have the ability to form their belief system.

IMPLICATIONS

REPUTATIONAL: WALTERS

Walter's actions have greatly affected his personal brand, both negatively and positively. An article, published by The 74, said that following the announcement of his campaign to put a bible in every Oklahoma classroom, supporters were eagerly waiting in the state's Board of Education chambers building to congratulate and thank him. One was quoted saying "We raise you up in prayer all the time. I thank you for what you've done," (Jacobson, 2024).

The article adds that "there are some lawmakers who haven't lost faith in Walters's ability to turn around an education system that consistently ranks among the worst in the nation." (Jacobson, 2024). Representative Chad Caldwell said "Career educators and the local media have treated Walters unfairly" when it comes to the actions he has taken during his term, (Jacobson, 2024).

In contrast, some of Walters' supporters have expressed concern that ongoing controversies surrounding his policies are damaging not only public schools but also Republican prospects for future elections. Kendal Sacchieri, former high school Spanish teacher and Republican candidate for state Senate, shared, "If Ryan Walters is trying to get a point across that we need to be teaching more Christian values, then he needs to go about it in a different way...Walters is not doing Republicans any favors" (Jacobson, 2024).

Sacchieri also shared that she would normally have similar beliefs to Walter's but she was "floored" by his choices and his recent budget request for \$3 million to purchase Bibles for schools" (Jacobson, 2024).

IMPLICATIONS

REPUTATIONAL: OKLAHOMA

Many are not only increasingly upset about his actions, but also about how they are damaging the state of Oklahoma's educational reputation.

People are upset that Walters' focus on issues such as banning certain books, limiting the discussion of gender identity, and restricting discussions on race detracts from the real issues facing Oklahoma's public education system, such as funding shortfalls, teacher retention, and improving student outcomes.

By prioritizing these contentious debates, Walters risks overshadowing the more urgent educational challenges that affect students' learning experiences and overall achievement.

According to a 2024 study, Oklahoma was ranked 49th in education out of the United States (Park, 2024), falling short in all subjects based on average test scores among students (Martinez-Keel, 2023).

With median rankings for almost all subjects falling in the forties, Oklahoma public instruction needs reconstruction, something that Walters has been working on since his first day in office. As his right-wing policies cross ethical lines, the impact that his religious policies hold for schools creates both positive and negative conversations across party lines.

CASE MANAGEMENT REVISIONS

IMPROVED COMMUNICATION

When implementing new educational mandates and partisan language required in all Oklahoma classrooms, particularly those involving potentially divisive topics such as religious curricula, establishing a platform for open communication is crucial; students are not able with these mandates to form their own opinions when required content does not allow for it.

Real-time discussions through community engagement activities, such as town halls or forums, align with the principles of transparent governance and participatory decision-making. These events allow stakeholders, including parents, teachers, students, and community leaders, to directly express concerns, ask questions, and contribute to the decision-making process.

Walters' response to his opposition could be handled much better and with less accusatory language. In an interview with CNN, Walters responded to questions of his authority in office as "gaslighting from the left," and redirected the question to an opportunity to further spread the Republican agenda on a national news outlet (CNN, 2024). Pushing from the interviewer asking about petitions calling for his impeachment, Walters honed in on his perspective of "the left driving the Bible out of schools" (CNN, 2024).

If Walters were to use more mindful communication and less aggression, perhaps his followers as well as some of his opponents would be more receptive to hearing out his ideas.

CONCLUSION

SOCIETAL

REFERENCES