

# Georgia may OK school Bible classes: Elective courses in public high schools

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Georgia's legislature, with both major parties approving, has overwhelmingly passed a bill to fund elective Bible courses in public high schools.

When Democratic lawmakers introduced a bill on Bible literacy this year to show that the issue is not strictly a Republican one, the state GOP majority killed that initial proposal and introduced their own version. Many expect that Republican governor Sonny Perdue will sign it into law.

Legislators sought to recommend an approach acceptable to First Amendment experts. The bill states that separate courses on the Old and New Testaments should be taught "in an objective and nondevotional manner, with no attempt made to indoctrinate students as to either the truth or falsity" of the texts.

Some school districts around the country already teach such courses, but Charles Haynes, a senior scholar with the Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center, told reporters that he believes that the bill, passed March 27, is the first ever approved on a statewide basis. A similar bill is being considered in Alabama, he said.

If Governor Perdue accepts the bill, the State Board of Education must adopt curricula by February of next year for classes on the "history and literature" of the two testament eras. Local schools then would decide whether to offer the optional classes for students from the ninth through 12th grades.

People for the American Way has successfully sued school districts in Mississippi and Florida for violating constitutional guidelines for classes about the Bible and its impact on culture and history. Judith E. Schaeffer, deputy legal director of PFAW, said that until the curricula are spelled out, their constitutionality will be unknown. A red flag was raised for her in the bill's statement that students should learn "the

history recorded by the Old and New Testaments.” Courts have ruled that the Bible cannot be taught as history, she said.

Both Haynes and Schaeffer said that equipping high school teachers to teach the Bible without consciously or unconsciously repeating doctrinal interpretations will be difficult.

As it happens, controversy surfaced last year over competing textbooks whose publishers seek customers among school districts. The head-to-head battle has been waged between proponents of the conservative National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools’ 300-page teachers guide, *The Bible in History and Literature*, and those of the broader-sourced *The Bible and Its Influence*, published by the Biblical Literacy Project. (See the Century’s critique of the first, August 23, 2005; and of the second, February 21, 2006.)

Another recently published book, designed for university professors teaching courses on the Bible, may provide ideas for the high school level as well.

About 100 members of the Society of Biblical Literature contributed short entries in *Teaching the Bible: Practical Strategies for Classroom Instruction*, a paperback published in November by the Atlanta-based SBL. Many entries relate the biblical topics to films, art, music and literature. While some are aimed at issues raised at the seminary or graduate-school level, others deal with questions that arise in introductory courses.