



THE MINISTRY OF  
RELEASED TIME CHRISTIAN EDUCATION





# TIME FOR GOD

THE MINISTRY OF

RELEASED TIME CHRISTIAN  
EDUCATION

IN AMERICA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS



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The Fellowship of Christian Released Time Ministries

[www.rtce.org](http://www.rtce.org)

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In this booklet you will discover that Released Time Education provides religious instruction to public school students during the school day. Any faith or religion may participate. This booklet is especially focused on Christ centered, Bible based teaching that can be provided to public school students through a Released Time program. Released Time is legal and can be done in many school districts across the United States.



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Each week day across the United States nearly fifty million elementary, middle school and high school students leave their homes early in the morning to spend six to eight hours on a public school campus.<sup>1</sup> There they will encounter powerful influences that can mold and shape their lives. Students are especially impressionable during these formidable years, but one influence that will not be present in the public school classroom is a religious or spiritual influence. Supreme Court decisions have insured that the daily educational experience of students will take place in a religion free environment. In many instances the secular influences and the instructional content students receive in the public school on important issues such as morality, the origin of mankind, and what it means to be human, will contradict what these students are being taught at home.

Many parents who desire an education that includes moral and spiritual instruction for their children have chosen alternate means of education such as private schools or home schooling. But there are thousands of parents who have no alternative but public school and yet ardently desire that their children receive spiritual instruction with their public school education.<sup>2</sup> Is such a thing possible?

The answer is yes! Public school students can receive spiritual and religious instruction if there is a *Released Time Education* (RTE) program in place in their local school district. Released Time Education, which is protected constitutionally, allows public school students to leave the school campus during the school day to receive religious instruction at a nearby off campus teaching site.

**The History of Released Time Education**

Early in the twentieth century as more and more families were moving from the farm to the city and as our educational system was rapidly evolving from the rural schoolhouse to large urban school districts, many parents were concerned about the lack of spiritual and biblical instruction in the “big city” schools. In many instances administrators and teachers shared this same concern. The absence of such instruction was mainly due to the re-interpretation of the first amendment “Establishment Clause.” Religious instruction in public schools was deemed to be unconstitutional in that there was an

<sup>1</sup> US Department of Education, IES National Center for Educational Statistic, [www.edgov//fastfacts/](http://www.edgov//fastfacts/)

<sup>2</sup> The desire for RTE programs is indicated by the fact that when programs start parents sign up their kids. A recent example: in Chino Valley, California, a program that began with two schools has rapidly expanded to include all twenty-two district schools with all classes at full capacity.

appearance that governmentally funded “public” schools were endorsing religion. In Gary, Indiana these parental concerns fell upon the sympathetic ear of William Wirt, superintendent of the Gary school system.<sup>3</sup> Believing that it was imperative to bring religious and moral values into the lives of the student population, Superintendent Wirt brought in local clergy to hold classes within the schools and released from classes all children who desired to attend the religious instruction. This practice led to the prominent name of “released time education.” In the fall of 1914, there were 619 students enrolled in the program. The practice of releasing students from their classroom for religious instruction soon caught on and spread across the nation. By 1947, two million public school students were participating in RT programs. Programs varied from city to city, but one key underlying belief for the various programs was that the academic education in the public school needed to be buttressed by spiritual and moral training,

A Legal Challenge

The growth of released time programs however, was not without legal challenge. The first challenge came in 1948. It involved the school district in Champagne, Illinois. The program had begun ten years earlier when juvenile delinquency began to rise. Clergy from several faiths formed a voluntary association called the Champagne Council on Religious Education to offer a program of religious instruction as a solution to the problems of local youth. The council employed teachers at no expense to the school district, received approval and supervision from the superintendent of schools, and obtained parental

<sup>3</sup> Whitehead, John “The Rights of Religious Persons in Public Education” Wheaton, Illinois, Crossways Books, 1991. Page 171

<sup>10</sup> Abt Associates Inc. “Crime and Justice Trends in the United States During the Past Three Decades,” January 31, 2000, Prepared by Douglas McDonald and Peter Finn

Three Compelling Reasons for Released Time Christian Education

Released Time can address questions that cannot be addressed in the public school classroom.

- Where did I come from?
- What is the meaning of life?
- What happens when I die?

In the public school setting these questions can only be met with answers rooted in evolutionary theory or silence. The same is true of such questions as:

- Is God real?
- What does God require from me?
- Is it possible to know God?

A myriad of court decisions has established a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy concerning the subject of God in our nation’s public schools. But the vital spiritual issues that can’t be discussed in the public school can be taught and discussed in the Released Time Education class.

Released Time Education can teach the moral absolutes that the public school will not teach.

The lesson of the later half of the last century is that if you deny the youth of America a moral compass, America will see a moral collapse. From 1976 to 1993, the proportion of youths aged 14 to 17 committing homicide tripled and, for 18 to 24 year olds, almost doubled. By 1986 the homicide rate for 14 to 17 year olds surpassed the homicide rates for older persons aged 25 to 49.<sup>10</sup> There were other alarming increases in unwanted teen pregnancies, teen abortion and school drop out rates. As these and similar kinds of statistics skyrocketed, test scores plummeted. The twentieth century closed with a spate of fatal school shootings. Ten years into the next millennium, public education hasn’t found satisfactory answers in how to teach children

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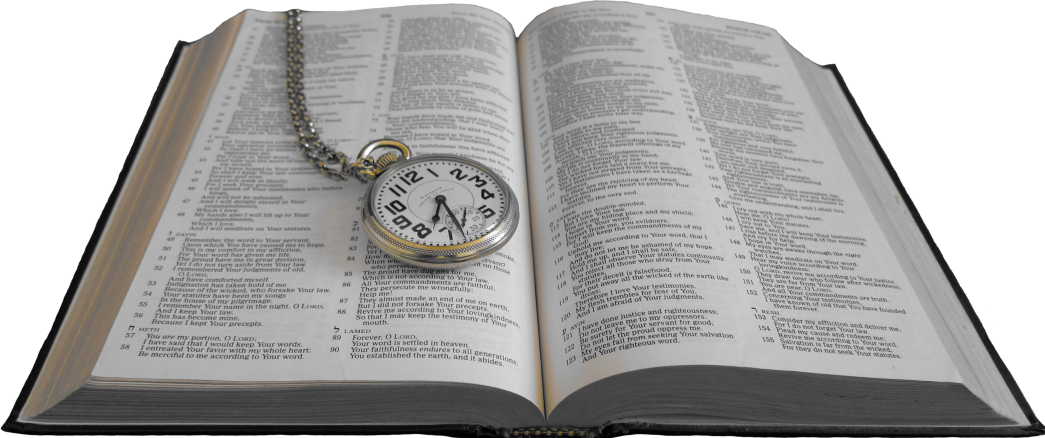
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Old Testament Survey, A Walk with Jesus (studying the gospels chronologically) and After the Cross, a verse by verse approach through the book of Acts with a survey of the New Testament. Students receive two credits per semester. Comments teacher Zach Adams, “Kids have given their hearts to the Lord. We’re seeing tremendous things, and kids get class credit for it..., we want the Bible to come alive, there are 65 students who come each day that I would otherwise not see. I want them to know that the answers are out there.”<sup>8</sup> Zach is a youth pastor and has been teaching released time since 2004. His dad, who is the senior pastor at nearby Calvary Chapel Stone Mountain, says he is “overjoyed” with what God has done through the classes. “At a minimum the Bible class is exposing unchurched kids to a Biblical worldview. Where else could this be done? I think the classes will have an impact in the lives of students for many years to come.”<sup>9</sup>

Conclusion

The ministry of Released Time Christian Education can effectively address the glaring spiritual void that exists in the hearts of so many public school students. RTE can also reinforce the values of students from Bible believing families whose children attend a public school. By teaching the Bible, a Released Time program can bring a much needed perspective on life that is missing in our highly secularized public education system. Starting a new program will require commitment and effort but the resulting ministry can have great potential in helping students come into a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ, learn the Bible and develop a biblical world view.

While a released time program may not be possible in every school district there are thousands of school districts where programs can be started. There are hundreds of Released Time ministries throughout the United States. Many are listed at [www.RTCE.com](http://www.RTCE.com). Below are Released Time organizations in different regions of the country that can give start up information to those interested in starting a Released Time program.

permission for students to participate in the program. The case made its way to the Supreme Court. There, in *McCollum v. the Board of Education*, the court ruled in a five to four decision that the program was unconstitutional because it used state funded public school classrooms for “sponsoring and effectively furthering religious beliefs.” The decision was met with widespread public disapproval.<sup>4</sup> Programs continued but the instruction took place at teaching sites off the school campus.

The second major challenge came in 1952. Once again the Supreme Court would hear arguments. This case, *Zorach v. Clauson*, would concern a New York City’s program that was initiated by parents, met off school property, and was funded entirely by religious organizations. Unlike *McCollum* the program did not use the “tax established and tax supported public school system.” This time the Court came down on the side of released time, ruling that the practice was indeed constitutional. In the opinion that was handed down, Justice William O. Douglas wrote the following:

We are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being....When the State encourages religious instruction or cooperates with religious authorities by adjusting the schedule of public events to sectarian needs, it follows the best of our traditions.....To hold that it may not would be to find in the Constitution a requirement that the government show a callous indifference to religious groups. This would be preferring those who believe in no religion over those who do not believe. 343 U.S. 313, 314 (1952).

moral values when that teaching is divorced from religious or spiritual content. Released Time can bring back strong moral training to public school students.

Released Time Education can help students develop a biblical world view

Our public education system produces a world view based on the tenets of secular humanism and Darwinian evolution. Public school students live in a culture that views religious claims as subjective and personal rather than objective truth claims. Josh McDowell in his book “The Last Generation”, as well as Ken Ham and Britt Beamer in their book “Already Gone”, report that over 80% of kids who grew up attending church will leave those churches soon after graduation from high school and may never return. The exodus has already begun. Why? Because public school students make a ‘real world’ connection to what they have learned in school and in our secular culture rather than what they have learned in church. Many churches are failing to give them the ‘sure foundation’ upon which they can build their faith nor have they taught them how to defend what they do believe. They have been equipped in the public school to give an apologetic for a secular world view but often they have not been equipped to give an apologetic for a Biblical world view. Christian Released time programs have the potential to reverse this disturbing trend and help students make a ‘real world’ connection to the life that is in Jesus Christ which is revealed in the Bible.

<sup>8</sup> Id. at 21

<sup>9</sup> Id. at 21

<sup>4</sup> Whitehead, John “The Rights of Religious Persons in Public Education” Wheaton, Illinois, Crossways Books, 1991. Page 172

This ruling by the Supreme Court (*Zorach v. Clauson*) has provided a legal basis for the existence of released time programs. Since this decision more than twenty states have adopted statutes or regulations regarding released time programs (For a listing of these state regulations please go to RTCE.org.). Although the courts have ruled that released time does not violate the Establishment Clause, it has yet to hold that denial of the program violates the free exercise rights of students. Therefore, unless otherwise restricted by state statutes, school districts have the discretion to choose whether to allow a released time program.

**Important Legal Guidelines**

Since *Zorach* there have been no major challenges to released time. However there have been cases, on the state and federal level, most of which have addressed the level of cooperation between the program and the school district. (For a listing of court cases pertaining to released time please go to RTCE.org). The following are important legal considerations in light of *Zorach* and other state and federal court cases concerning released time:

- State funds must not be used in the creation, implementation or the ongoing operation of a released time program.
- Schools may not be involved in recruiting students for released time programs by speaking out in favor of them or registering children in them. Released time officials should register new students directly without assistance from school administrators.
- Released time administrators may request enrollment lists from the school in order to determine which parents to contact about the released time program.
- Credit may be granted for participating in a released time program. It may also count towards the student’s graduation requirements (this would apply to a high school program). Additionally, schools may count these absent students for the purpose of allocating state funds.

and then sending many of their released time students to one of their camps. Others would include Joy-El Ministries in Greencastle, PA, which also conducts a camp program, RBM Ministries in Kalamazoo, MI, BCM Ministries in Jenison, MI and Child Evangelism Fellowship. These ministries, and many others across the United States, are taking advantage of released time education to teach elementary public school students the Bible. Research has shown that teaching elementary aged children spiritual truths will have five to eight times the impact of attracting and teaching the same number of older children or adults.<sup>6</sup>

***Middle School and High School Released Time programs***

The state of Georgia is home to several effective high school released time programs. In these types of programs the released time class will meet everyday. Participating students will typically sign up for released time as a non credit elective class, however there are high school programs where credit is given for the released time class. One such program is conducted by the *Gilmore Christian Learning Center* in Ellijay, Georgia. The center is right next to the local high school campus. Students make their way to the learning center where they will be taught by a state credentialed instructor. Classes deal with lifestyle issues taught from a biblical perspective. Classes are popular with students and attendance figures, grades and other pertinent information is passed on to the school by learning center officials. The center was built by Christian businessmen who wanted local high school students exposed to biblical truth. Funding is provided by local businesses, private donations and grants.

In the greater Atlanta area there are several high school as well as middle school programs. One thriving high school released time program in Gwinett County reaches over 250 junior and senior students in six different Gwinett County high schools. The program began in 2002. Students from these schools attend a daily forty-five minute class. Classes cover a two-year curriculum which includes a detailed analysis of comparative religion, a definitive presentation of Christianity, a contrast/comparison of other religions to the standard of Christianity, and a careful two week study of evolution. One of the program’s teachers comments, “After we have shredded evolution, students have a lot of questions for their biology teacher.”<sup>7</sup> Subsequent semesters will include an

<sup>6</sup> As quoted by Forrest Turpen CEAI 4/14 Window. Originally from Barna, George; “Re-Churching the Unchurched: Ventura, CA

<sup>7</sup> Quoted from Calvary Chapel Magazine, Issue 39 article titled, “Open Doors into Young Lives by Margot Bass.

In California there are 30 programs across the state that minister to elementary students. The Long Beach program, which each year provides released time programs for fourth and fifth grade students in 25 schools in three school districts, uses a Bible based curriculum that gives students an overview of the Bible with lessons drawn from the Old and New Testaments. Much of the content has an apologetic emphasis which encourages informed biblical faith and reasons for that faith. Fourth and fifth grade students are given weekly memory verse assignments and are taught how to navigate through the Bible learning the location of each book. The overall objective is to bring students to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and a clear understanding of the redemptive message of the Bible. At the end of the school year fifth grade students are given the Bible they have been studying marked with the highlighted verses they have memorized.

Twenty five miles away, the Chino Valley program, which began in the late nineties with programs in several schools, now provides released time to all twenty-two elementary schools in the Chino Valley school district and has begun providing released time to a Chino Valley middle school. Like the Long Beach program, Chino Valley utilizes converted buses as teaching sites which are parked near the school when a church is not in close proximity to the school. The Chino Hills program uses a Bible based curriculum which has an emphasis on Biblical creation and apologetics. The primary goal of the program is to bring students into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and to help them grow in their faith. Like many programs in California, liability insurance is provided by *Guide One*, a national insurance company which has special insurance packages for released time ministries. The program is funded through local church contributions (teachers are also recruited from these churches), as well as private donations and fund raising events.

There are a number of Released Time organizations that conduct elementary RTE programs in more than one school district or county. For example, in the state of Oregon *Portland Released-time Education Program* or *PREP* conducts Released time classes in forty schools in twelve different school districts located in three counties. Ministering on an even broader scale, *Children's Bible Ministries* or *CBM*, headquartered in Townsend, Tennessee operates divisions across eight states doing elementary released time education

## Update

Released time continued to be popular in the fifties and early sixties. Many faiths participated. But in the late sixties, and on into the seventies, released time began to diminish. Programs conducted by mainline denominations were discontinued. However, in the mid eighties released time began to make a dramatic comeback, especially Christian programs that were Bible-based. In the decade of the nineties and on into the new millennium, new programs have been started and older programs re-vitalized. Yet with the resurgence of released time there continue to be thousands of school districts throughout the country where there is no RTE program.

## Starting a Released Time Ministry

While the particulars may vary from state to state, and from district to district, there are certain fundamental steps that are common to any released time start-up effort. They might be best summarized with the words *Pray, Plan, Present*. Pray effectually, Plan comprehensively, Present convincingly.

## Pray!

A first recommended step is for leaders and organizers to begin to pray. If a church is initiating the start up process, encourage the congregation to pray and seek out a group that will pray regularly and specifically for the released time effort. The same would apply to a group of concerned individuals from different churches who desire to start released time. Prayer is an indispensable part of the process. Why is prayer of such importance? Although released time is legal throughout the United States by virtue of *Zorach*, as noted above, many states have passed laws governing the practice of released time. Typically, these laws, in accordance with the *Zorach* ruling, will grant the school board the discretion as to whether or not a program may be started. Thus a thorough and convincing presentation will need to be made to the school board. Not everyone in the community may agree that there should be a released time program. Some will take an adversarial position. Thus prayer will be essential.

## Plan!

A clear, well-researched implementation plan will also be essential. Part of the planning process should include information gathering. The plan should include all the information that those who are unfamiliar with released time need to know. Before a formal presentation is made to the school board it will be important to make contacts with individual board members. Support from community leaders or those who have established relationships with school board members are especially useful. Released time organizers will need to be well versed in their state laws and statutes pertaining to released time, as well as the *Zorach* decision. Board members will want to know about legality issues and may also ask about how the program will be implemented. The plan that has been prepared will help in addressing the questions that will come up. In talking to board members and administrators, it will also be helpful to be armed with letters of support from administrators and teachers in districts where there are effective released time programs. Eventually the released time proposal will come up for a board vote. Make sure you are prepared with a convincing presentation.

One question that will often be asked is, “How will this program benefit the district?” Short answer: “good kids make good students.” This is really what Christian released time is all about: building character through the teaching of God’s Word. There are other ways that released time will benefit public education: it is free to the district (no tax payer expense), by building character it improves behavior in the classroom, and it can improve academic performance.<sup>5</sup> Be sure and be prepared with answers that will connect with board members and administrators.

## Get Community Backing

Another important step is to form a community group of citizen supporters. A good mix would include pastors, educators, business people, and, of course, parents who want their children to have a released time program. The start up effort will be greatly enhanced if

planning day offers an ideal opportunity to teach released time without students missing academic time.

Programs across the country have met the above mentioned requirements and challenges in a variety of ways. In the following pages several programs in various regions of the country will be described. How these programs have dealt with some of the issues mentioned above will also be discussed.

### *Released Time programs for elementary students*

Most released time programs are offered to elementary students. Often either state statutes or the local school district policy will designate which grades are eligible for released time and at what time during the school day they may be released. There are districts where students from any grade may participate. Such programs may require at least 3 or 4 teachers and an equal amount of helpers so that students can be divided into age appropriate learning levels.



California RT kids in a mobile classroom

<sup>5</sup> Monique W. Morris, M.S., Barry Krisberg, PhD, Sharan Dhanoa, “A program evaluation of the Oakland, California Released Time Bible Education Program conducted by The National Council on Crime and Delinquency, National Council and Delinquency Executive Summary, 2003

classes, time is limited and must be managed carefully. The most important part of the class is the instructional time. Well prepared and presented lessons will awaken a spiritual hunger in the lives of many students. In the high school setting a lecture format is often used as well as small group discussions. One program occasionally brings in worship groups to lead students in a time of worship.

**Insurance and funding**

- How will the program be insured?

Liability insurance is a must and proof of insurance is normally required by the school district. The released time concept is unfamiliar to many insurance companies but there are several nation wide carriers who can provide insurance for release time programs. One such company is *Guide One* insurance which specializes in insuring churches and has developed insurance packages for released time programs. *Children’s Bible Ministry* (CBM) provides insurance for a number of released time programs which it sponsors in several states. Churches which sponsor a release time ministry can often get coverage through their insurance company.

- How will the program be funded?

Virtually all RTE programs depend upon private contributions. Often local churches will help with financial support. Some programs will have yearly fundraising events. When thinking through the financial aspects of starting a program it is important to remember that there can be no direct or indirect tax payer/school district funds that in any way support or underwrite the released time program. Even the appearance of such support can invite legal action.

It should be pointed out that there are instances where RTE programs are not allowed to meet during the school day when academic instruction is taking place. Some programs meet during the lunch hour and some will meet after school. Many districts in California and several other states have a weekly “teacher preparation day” where students are dismissed from the classroom an hour early but will often remain on campus. This

school district administrators and board members know that there is strong community backing.

**Additional Planning Concerns**

There are other important planning considerations:

- When and where will the released time students meet?
- Will transportation be needed?

Leaders will need to keep in mind that in many states, a state education statute governing released time will allocate a fixed amount of time for the RT class that may be as little as one hour a week. Such a time constraint would require that the off campus teaching site be near the school. Some programs use mobile classrooms (trailers or converted buses) which are parked at or near the school, while other programs transport students to nearby teaching sites (often churches). Some are fortunate to have teaching sites that are adjacent to or within walking distance of the school. The teaching site will need to be safe, near the school and conducive to learning.

There are RTE programs that do not meet every day or every week; some are only able to meet with released time students once a month. School Ministries, a Released time provider in South Carolina suggests that churches who wish to adopt a school for the purpose of starting a RTE program, begin by meeting with the Released time class four to six times the first year and then increase the number of meetings each new school year. This has proved to be an effective approach and churches have started Released Time on this basis.

- How will the ministry be promoted, i.e., how will parents and students learn about the program and how will they register?

In most instances the local program will need to get the word out through churches and various media. Interestingly, many programs report that over sixty per cent of the participants are from unchurched homes, so released time programs will need to reach

beyond the church in student recruitment efforts. Once classes begin, students will often invite their friends. An effective web site where online registration can take place will be very useful. Leaders will need to remember that the Courts have prohibited the schools from being involved in the promotion of released-time.

**Who Will Participate, Who Will Teach?**

- Will the program be for elementary students, if so, what grade(s), or is the target student group going to be middle school or high school students?

Middle school and high school programs will often require that the class meet everyday and students who attend will attend on an elective basis. This calls for a detailed, carefully planned curriculum as well as a teacher that is available to teach everyday and is gifted and trained in instructing middle school or high school students.

- Who will teach the class?

Released time programs have utilized an array of teachers from different walks of life including pastors, retired public school teachers, Sunday school teachers, and homemakers. Teachers will need to be screened, fingerprinted and trained. When students are released from the school campus their safety and welfare becomes the responsibility of the released time program. Teachers will need helpers which include escorts when walking students to a nearby teaching site. Again, organizers must keep in mind that the courts prohibit the involvement of “on duty” public school teachers who are teaching at schools where released-time is taking place.

**Important!**

- What will be taught and what kind of curriculum will be used?
- What are the objectives and goals of the spiritual instruction that the released time students will receive?

These are crucial questions. How they are addressed will often determine the effectiveness and fruitfulness of the program. By its very nature, our public educational system, steeped in secular humanism, will invite spiritual doubt and unbelief. At some point in their educational experience, students will likely be told that the Bible is filled with “myths and fairytales” and they will be challenged by teachers who have a deeply rooted bias against both the Bible and Christianity. Veteran Released Time providers recommend that new providers consider curriculum and teaching materials that will aid the RT teacher in a) giving students an overview of the Bible and teaching its redemptive message b) affirming the veracity of the Bible and c) teaching RTE students how to defend the Bible and its teachings (see 1 Peter 3:15). Emphasis should be given to the Genesis account of creation. High School and middle school programs should seek to teach RT students what the Scripture says about human sexuality and marriage. There will be many RT students who have not been exposed to the Bible. Released Time leaders across the country report that typically, sixty-five per cent of students in a Released Time class do not attend church. Many of them have never held a Bible in their hands. Released Time Christian Education will give them the opportunity to hear and experience the life changing truths of the Bible.

Successful programs have established teaching formats that stimulate student interest and participation. Elementary classes often include the singing of worship songs, occasional games and exercises that aid students in scripture memorization and other activities that help students retain what they have learned. However, in most

**“Good Kids Made Good Students”**

The ancient wisdom literature in the Old Testament of the Bible declares that, “the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.”<sup>11</sup> The first federal law that addressed education, the Northwest Ordinance, states in article III, “religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”<sup>12</sup> For four centuries this threefold emphasis of morality, religion and knowledge was foundational to American education. It helped produce strong character and strong academic achievement. Can the released time emphasis of Bible based instruction and morality contribute to improved academic performance for today’s public school students? According to a study conducted by The National Council on Crime and Delinquency the answer is yes.<sup>13</sup> Their evaluation of the Oakland, California Released Time program in the fall of 2003 concluded that, “a comparative review between the academic performance scores of Oakland Released Time students and all 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders in Released Time schools reveals that students in Oakland Released Time perform better than their classmates as a whole in almost every category.” After documenting how the scores of Oakland Released Time students improved after one year in comprehension, spelling and vocabulary, the report went on to state that, “Oakland Released Time reinforces positive moral and character development that is antithetical to engaging in criminal or delinquent behavior.” The study shows that Released Time can help develop good kids of strong character as well as good students who do well academically.

<sup>11</sup> Proverbs 9:10, Psalm 111:10

<sup>12</sup> Barton, David, “Four Centuries of American Education, Wallbuilders, Aledo Texas 2004 pg 19