

“Every community needs to know about this strategy!”

Jon Gordon, 14x Best Selling Author

~~before~~  
~~after~~

# DURING SCHOOL HOURS

WHY and HOW LifeWise Academy  
is reinstalling religious education  
into the *public school day*.

————— Joel Penton, Founder & CEO of LifeWise Academy —————



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~~before~~  
~~after~~

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**WHY** and **HOW** LifeWise Academy  
is reinstalling religious education  
into the *public school day*.



## **DURING SCHOOL HOURS**

By Joel Penton

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## **DEDICATION**

For the thousands of men and women in the LifeWise family who are making sacrifices every day to impact future generations.

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# MY STORY



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## A LIFEWISE STORY

*"My Story: The Day That Changed Everything"*

I grew up in Van Wert, Ohio, a small town in the northwest corner of the state. After high school, I attended The Ohio State University where I played football on the Buckeyes' defensive line (Go Bucks!). I wasn't a marquee player, but I did earn some varsity letters, and they gave me a 2002 National Championship ring so I can prove that I was on the team.

After I graduated, I became a motivational speaker in middle schools and high schools all over the country, engaging with teachers and administrators and challenging students to live a life of commitment. I also spoke at faith-based outreach events after school hours where students could come back and hear about what really gives my life purpose. Along the way I founded a nonprofit speakers' bureau that has now, by God's grace, touched more than three thousand schools and two million students nationwide. It's been a fun ride.

But I never lost my ties to Van Wert. So when a local released time program called Cross Over the Hill dedicated their newly built Bible education facility, they invited me to speak at the ceremony (probably because my sister was on the board). And I gladly agreed (also probably because my sister was on the board). But I was completely unprepared for just how much my life was about to change.

As I prepared for the speech, I learned more about the incredible program, and my mind was absolutely blown. “Wait, they’re teaching the Bible to public school students DURING SCHOOL HOURS? How is this possible? And 95% of the entire elementary school is enrolled? What??”

After the ceremony, I sat in on their board meeting, and they asked me to help them answer one question: Why don’t more communities have programs like this?

Sitting in that meeting, a new vision for what was possible popped fully formed into my head. On the drive home that evening, I had a clear-as-day picture in my mind of all that could be accomplished if we could spread what this one program had done.

- ✦ In Van Wert, nearly every student in the school was enrolled in the program and loved it. What if other students could have a similar, positive experience?
- ✦ Teachers and administrators talked about the positive effects the program had. What if other schools could experience the same positive influence?
- ✦ The whole community—parents, churches, local leaders—was supporting the school in effective and truly helpful ways. What if other schools received similar support? What if community members were just waiting and hoping for an opportunity to get involved?
- ✦ And most of all, what if we could bring all of it together in a usable, effective, replicable model?

My vision was clear but uncertain. There was a lot to consider and research. But if we could do it, I was convinced that we could change the very face of public education.

Over five years later, I am even more convinced.

So I wrote a book.



# AN IMPORTANT CLARIFICATION

What This Book Is and Isn't About

I've written this book to share two things with you:

1. Why religious education should be reinstalled into the public school day.
2. How any community can do it successfully and immediately.

So why am I qualified to discuss these things? Simple—because we're doing it.

I'm the founder and CEO of LifeWise Academy, a nonprofit ministry that provides religious education for public school students during school hours. And we—my team and I, along with dozens of local communities—are making it happen *right now*.

The concept is simple. We transport students from their school to a nearby location, provide a weekly Bible education class, and return them to their schools.

And did I mention that it all takes place *during school hours*?

Those three little words are what make LifeWise Academy a ground-breaking opportunity.

When people first hear about LifeWise, they usually think it sounds made up or illegal. But it's not.

It's a little-known approach called released time religious instruction. And it's a game-changer. In fact, we are convinced that released time has been the single greatest missed opportunity to impact the next generation of public school students.

For decades, ministries have been impacting public school students *before* and *after* school. But the students who most need to be reached are often missed due to logistical and scheduling challenges. What we're doing is different—because it's *during* school hours, we're able to better integrate into the school's culture and reach the previously unreachable.

When people first hear about LifeWise, they usually think it sounds made up or illegal. But it's not.

Our program is entirely real and fully legal since the Supreme Court ruled on this decades ago. But the concept has been just sitting there, somewhat dormant. Until now.

Right now, we are taking big steps to provide the opportunity of released time to districts everywhere. And things are starting to move. In fact, they're starting to *explode*.

LifeWise Academy is only a few years old, but its reach is growing literally by the day. At the time of this writing, we are serving more than one hundred schools nationwide, and we're actively engaged with several hundred more communities who are taking steps toward starting a program for their local public school students.

What we are seeing and experiencing is bigger than we ever imagined. It's starting to feel like a movement. Like a revolution. And we are excited—hard-to-sleep excited—about the program and its possibilities.

Which is why I wrote this book. In these chapters, I'll be sharing all about the exciting opportunity that is released time and LifeWise Academy.

But before we dive into what this book is about—the WHY and the HOW of reinstalling religious education into the public school day—let’s get clear about what it *isn’t* about.

## WHAT I’M LEAVING OUT

This book is not about *politics*.

For most people, their views on public education are directly connected to their political views. But none of those views are the point of this book. I won’t be addressing right-wing or left-wing ideas or political parties or anyone’s favorite candidates. There is room in this book for people of all political persuasions, and no one has to think (or vote) like me in order to consider or appreciate what we’ll discuss in these pages.

This book is not about *the merits of public education*.

I will not be discussing the value of public education itself or whether students should attend public schools. Our approach assumes that public schools are a permanent part of our education landscape. There are many who are fully committed to public education and those who recommend other tracks (like private schools, charter schools, or homeschool), and there is much we could say about each option. This book is simply not the place for that debate.

The one thing I will say on this topic—because it is important—is that I believe all educators are heroes. They serve their students and communities in selfless, sacrificial ways. They give their time, money, and hearts to seeing their students thrive. And they are to be supported and commended.

This book is not about *the methods of public education*.

I will not be exploring the systems and models, past or present, of public education. I will mention them because it’s necessary to make my point. But this book will not be debating how *this model*

is so much better than *that model* or which model I like best. Because the issue isn’t the model at all. No matter what model schools choose, my argument will remain the same: it is imperative that we once again include religious education during school hours.

This book is not about *the good old days*.

There were many good things that we can point to about education in the past, as well as things we wouldn’t want to repeat. Really, there’s no such thing as “the good old days,” so this book isn’t a call to turn back the clock in any way. Instead, this book is about the future. I’m going to lay out strategies—practical, positive, real-world strategies—that will work in today’s society with its new and unique needs and in the decades to come.

Lastly, this book is not about *theology*.

Full disclosure: LifeWise Academy is a Christian religious education program that teaches the Bible. But this book is not my attempt to convince you about my theological views. There are great books for that, which I’m happy to recommend, but my theological position is not the point. Regardless of my theology, or yours, it’s easy to see the benefits that religious education can bring to the public school system and its students. But let me repeat: specific points of theology will not appear anywhere in these pages. (You’re welcome.)

## THE TWO-PART ROADMAP

As I said before, this book is about the WHY and HOW of reinstalling religious education into the public school day.

But that vision could be more clear. So here’s the detailed summary of my goal for this book:

*“In this book, I’m going to show you WHY reinstalling religious education into the public school day is our best opportunity to positively impact students, schools and communities and lay out a clear plan for HOW to do it legally and effectively.” (Joel)*

Let me break down the highlights.

*“I’m going to show you”*

Everything you’re about to read is factually, provably true. I can back up my claims with both real-world examples and well-crafted academic studies. I’m not trying to hoodwink you. This is not a bait-and-switch. Over the next ten chapters, I’m going to demonstrate, clearly and effectively, that what I’m proposing can and does work.

*“our best opportunity”*

Reinstalling religious education isn’t the only option we have to help students and schools. But I believe it is the greatest missed opportunity in education right now. It is powerful, positive, and extremely underused. What lies before us is a clear and effective path we would be entirely remiss to ignore.

*“to positively impact students, schools and communities”*

We all want to see our students succeed academically and develop into fully mature, thriving humans. We want to see schools supported and better equipped to fulfill their mission. And we want to see communities and families come alongside both students and schools in powerful and positive ways.

I have seen all of this happen in real schools, in real communities, with real students. This isn’t wishful thinking. It’s hope. Hope that comes when religious education is reinstalled into public education.

*“a clear plan for how to do it legally and effectively”*

The path forward is released time religious instruction. The tool we’ve created to forge that path is LifeWise Academy. It is legal and effective, and I will show you exactly how we can make it work. The bulk of the book will lay out this plan in detail and address objections.

Objections like these:

- ✦ What about separation of church and state? (check out chapter 5)
- ✦ But religious instruction isn’t the purpose of public education, Joel! (see chapter 2)
- ✦ Which religions would be taught? Won’t it offend people? (that’s chapter 5, too)
- ✦ What makes LifeWise so special? (you want chapters 7 and 8)
- ✦ So how do you fit LifeWise classes into the schedule anyway? (check out the FAQ appendix)

I hear these questions all the time. Because the issues we’re wrestling with are not new. Neither is the debate. And interestingly, neither is the solution.

But I’m proposing a new look at an old approach. One that really works. One that could change everything. And one that begins by understanding WHY we need to reinstall religious education in the first place.



Three Ways  
**TO READ THIS BOOK**

**#1** “I’m not sure whether religious education for public school students is a good idea.”

**READ STRAIGHT THROUGH, BEGINNING TO END.**

**#2** “I already know religious education is a good idea. I want to know how to get it done.”

**SKIP TO PART TWO FOR THE GOODS...**

and come back to read Part One afterward so you can engage with others.

**#3** “I don’t have a great attention span. I just like stories.”

**READ ALL RED PAGES SCATTERED THROUGHOUT.**

Those are super quick stories and tidbits. Also read chapters 7 and 8 which contain the story of LifeWise. Those chapters even have pictures.

Is something really missing?

# PART ONE

Why

→  
We're Reinstalling Religious Education

# CHAPTER

# 01

## UNDOING PUBLIC EDUCATION

WHY Religious Education Was Removed

A lot of people see what we're doing with LifeWise Academy, incorporating religious instruction into the public school day, as “innovative.”

It's kind of ironic. Because once upon a time, no one would have considered having public schools without it.

Of course, all that changed years ago. Religious education has long since been removed from public education. And whether or not you celebrate that development, my point is—it happened.

Religious education was at one time part of American education, and now it isn't. It was, at one point, considered central to ed

ucation’s purpose, and now it’s been effectively eliminated.

Some readers may call that progress. Others may disagree. But in this chapter, I simply want to lay out a very brief outline of how the removal happened. I’ll organize the account into four stages.

## STAGE ONE: COLONIES, COMMUNITIES, AND THE CHURCH

### *Early 1600s to Late 1700s – Religion as the Focus of Education*

Education in Colonial America didn’t just include religious instruction, it was born out of religious motivations.

Teaching people to read was one of the primary goals of early American education. Each colony established “local varieties of *fee* and *free* schools”<sup>1</sup> because, from the first settlers’ arrival, they believed “all children ought to be able to read, no matter how low their station or how poor their circumstances.”<sup>2</sup>

And it was religious ideals that drove this desire.

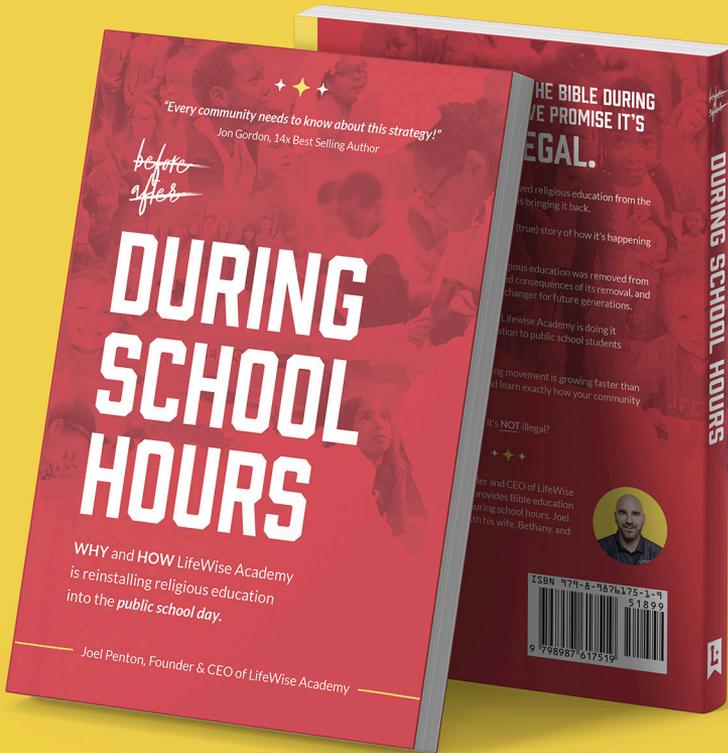
The early colonists wanted their children to be literate primarily so that they could read the Bible. Basic reading texts were almost entirely religious.<sup>3</sup> For example, quotations from the Bible made up almost 90% of early editions of *The New England Primer*, one of the most popular textbooks of the time.<sup>4</sup>

Laws were even passed that emphasized this religious focus. The Old Deluder Satan Act, passed in Massachusetts in 1647, is perhaps the most striking example. It required families and communities to teach children to read, stating explicitly that teaching children to read prevented them from growing up ignorant of the Bible.<sup>5</sup>

And this approach was typical throughout the colonies in every type of school—the Puritan approach of New England, the parochial schools of the middle colonies, or the hired tutors of the South.<sup>6</sup> “Religious instruction was the main purpose of their existence and the principal content of their curriculum.”<sup>7</sup>

Of course, public schools as we know them did not exist yet. But it was Christian leaders, including Reverend John Cotton, who es-

tablished the Boston Latin School (BLS), considered by many to be the first public school in America. Founded in 1635, the BLS was publicly funded from its inception, and its first admission requirements included reading several verses from the Bible.<sup>8</sup>



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