

SUBJECT: Offering elective courses on the Bible to certain public school students

COMMITTEE: Public Education — favorable, without amendment

VOTE: 12 ayes — Dutton, Lozano, Allen, Allison, K. Bell, Bernal, Buckley, Huberty, K. King, Meza, Talarico, VanDeaver

0 nays

1 absent — M. González

WITNESSES: For — Chris Allen, Marble Falls ISD; Tamara Berkman, Teach the Whole Bible; Mary Castle, Texas Values Action; Lauren Berkman; Denise Seibert; (*Registered, but did not testify:* Marshall Kenderdine, Baptist General Convention of Texas; Starlee Coleman, Texas Public Charter Schools Association; Gregory McCarthy, Texas Values Action; Thomas Parkinson; Calvin Tillman; Al Zito)

Against — Sondra Kaplan; (*Registered, but did not testify:* Carisa Lopez, Texas Freedom Network; Susana Carranza; Dorothy Ann Compton; Lisa Flores; Linda Guy; Gregg Vunderink)

On — (*Registered, but did not testify:* Eric Marin and Monica Martinez, Texas Education Agency)

BACKGROUND: Education Code sec. 28.011 describes elective courses on the Bible's Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and New Testament and their impact on the history and literature of Western civilization that a school district may offer to students in grade 9 or above.

There have been calls to expand elective course offerings in the academic study of the Bible from public high school students to students in middle school.

DIGEST: HB 2681 would change from grade 9 to grade 6 the grade level at which a public school district could begin offering students an elective course on

the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and its impact and the New Testament and its impact, or an elective course that combined the two courses.

The bill would require a teacher of the Bible electives to hold a certificate in certain subjects that qualified the teacher to teach at the grade level at which the course was offered, with, where practical, a minor in religion or biblical studies. The Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament electives could be taught only by a teacher who had successfully completed Bible course training.

A course offered under the bill's provisions to students in grade 6, 7, or 8 would be considered a social studies course for the purpose of complying with the required curriculum.

The bill would apply beginning with the 2021-2022 school year.

The bill would take immediate effect if finally passed by a two-thirds record vote of the membership of each house. Otherwise, it would take effect September 1, 2021.

NOTES:

According to the Legislative Budget Board, the bill would have a negative impact of about \$301,000 to general revenue through fiscal 2023. The bill would make no appropriation but could provide the legal basis for an appropriation of funds to implement the bill's provisions.