

NC private schools teach US history own way

State leaders push a program that funds lessons through a conservative lens

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USA Today Network

This year in North Carolina, American history got very political.

But amid a broader focus on critical race theory and new state history standards, the North Carolina General Assembly took steps in 2021 that could, in perhaps more direct ways, impact what North Carolina students learn about their nation's past.

In bills and budget proposals, the legislature looks to expand the state's already growing Opportunity Scholarship Program, which gives public money — often called vouchers — to help families pay for private schools.

While North Carolina private schools span the political and religious spectrum, more than 75% of families use vouchers to enroll their children in conservative Evangelical schools that teach through an ideological lens called a “biblical worldview.”

Some aspects of “biblical worldview” curriculums may be better known: They espouse Young Earth Creationism which proclaims our planet is between 6,000 to 10,000 years old (Scientists calculate the earth dates back 4.5 billion years). Instead of teaching the big bang and gradual evolution as facts, these curriculums teach the opening chapter of Genesis literally to mean the world was created in six days.

And “biblical worldview” lessons typically teach that being gay, bisexual, or transgender is immoral; many of the schools that received the most opportunity scholarships last year refuse to enroll LGBTQ

See SCHOOLS, Page 10A

Schools

Continued from Page 1A

students, parents, and allies.

These curriculums, experts say, also have a particular way of teaching American history.

Rise of 'biblical worldview' lessons

In the past half-century, a pair of textbook publishers have boosted "biblical worldview" curriculums nationwide. In 1972, Abeka Book started out of Florida's Pensacola Christian College, while BJU Press began the following year at Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina.

Over the decades, Abeka and BJU Press attracted families who wanted something starkly different from what mainstream secular lessons offered said Adam Laats, a professor at Binghamton University who has written multiple books on what he calls fundamentalism Christian education.

"Their distinctiveness gives them a market," Laats said. "If you looked at (an Abeka or BJU Press) school and it seemed the same as a public school down the road, then you were doing something wrong."

Contrasts between these textbooks and what's taught in public classrooms are manifold; in history alone, several differences exist between what topics get covered, which don't, how historical events are framed, and whose stories get told.

Abeka and BJU Press commonly intertwine historical events with the stories of scripture: In discussing the ways the first people may have crossed into North America, BJU Press's 11th grade U.S. history book references the "Flood" that lifted Noah's Ark. Abeka credits God with swaying certain historical events, as when the English scored a surprise victory over the Spanish Armada in the 1500s.

"There are often biblical truths that you can use to evaluate those events of history," said Amy Yohe, managing editor of Abeka Publishing. "Abeka's worldview is distinctly biblical. The people, the events of history are examined in light of biblical truth."

BJU Press representatives declined to respond to questions for this story.

Yet Laats argues these companies strategically fit traditionally conservative, non-religious political beliefs - like low taxes, anti-unionization, distrust of the media, laissez-faire economics, fewer government assistance programs, and rejections of environmentalism and multiculturalism - into a single "biblical" ideology.

Kathleen Wellman, a professor at Southern Methodist University and author of the book "Hijacking History: How the Christian Right Teaches History and Why It Matters," says "biblical worldviews" lessons critique societies that don't accept Protestant Christianity or the "social and political views of ringing Republicans."

Graphics by Zachary Dennis.

"Other civilizations," she added "are treated much less thoroughly and very much ancillary to the story of the heroic white Protestants."

Wellman argued "biblical worldview" textbooks tend to support ideas like the "Lost Cause" myth, which asserts the Civil War was fought more over the preservation of states' rights than the more ignoble pursuit of keeping slavery. For example, Accelerated Christian Education - another prominent publisher - frequently refers to the Civil War as "the War Between the States," a term many scholars consider sympathetic to the Confederacy and the Lost Cause myth.

Abeka's 11th-grade history textbook includes seven references to Confederate general Stonewall Jackson (including one as the "great Stonewall Jackson") but abolitionist and civil rights leader Frederick Douglass - the most photographed African of the 19th century - is only covered once in a two-sentence blurb near the end of the book.

"We want to mention as many people as we can in the number of pages and the amount of time that a course can cover," Abeka's Yohe said. "So, it's going to vary really depending on the significance of the events and who was involved."

Based on her research, Wellman noted variations between the major textbook publishers, pointing out that BJU Press's interpretations include "some more complexity and some subtleties"



Fayetteville Christian School was the fourth largest recipient of voucher money in North Carolina last year. OBSERVER FILE PHOTO

while Abeka is "much more polemic."

For example, Abeka's 11th-grade history textbook introduces the famous South African anti-Apartheid leader as "Communist Sympathizer Nelson Mandela."

Yohe rejected claims that her company's history curriculum carries broader political aims. "I want to assure you that Abeka's two core goals are accurate, factual representation through a biblical worldview, and that's where it boils down," she said.

Vouchers fuel 'biblical worldview'

Though no part of North Carolina's Opportunity Scholarship Program mentions "Biblical worldview," the ideology and the voucher program are strongly linked.

A 2018 study by the North Carolina League of Women Voters found that 77% of these vouchers went "to schools with a literal biblical worldview that affects all areas of the curriculum."

For the 2020-2021 school year, at least eight of the 10 schools that received the most taxpayer-funded scholarships profess on their websites to teach lessons rooted in biblical worldviews. The USA Today Network reached out to each of these schools regarding their history curriculum, but none responded. According to Abeka's website, at least some of the publisher's materials are used by these eight schools.

While the North Carolina Division of Non-Public Education tracks how many of the state's private schools are religious (around 68%), neither it nor any other state agency monitors the textbooks private schools use.

Since starting in 2014, the state Opportunity Scholarship Program has grown exponentially each year. For the 2020-21 school year, the program doled out \$61.5 million to more than 16,000 students.

If the program were its own school district, it would have ranked as the state's 22nd largest, and it's poised to expand.

According to the North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority which oversees the Opportunity Scholarship Program, submitted applications for the program are up 4% compared to at this point last year.

Supporters highlight how the public money helps low-income students attend quality schools they otherwise couldn't afford.

"I've seen a lot of government programs, in my time that never achieved what they intend to achieve, except this one," said Mike Long, president of Parents for Educational Freedom in North Carolina.

The program's growth shows parents desire alternatives to their school districts, and the pandemic may have only accelerated this demand. Last summer, Opportunity Scholarship applications spiked after COVID-19 put public-school schedules in flux.

Opponents argue private schools receiving taxpayer dollars lack accountability and highlight that these schools can and do refuse to admit LGBTQ students and those who practice different religions. Academics are also a concern; the NC League of Women Voters concluded that anti-scientific parts of "biblical worldview" lessons - like Young Earth Creationism - fail to "prepare stu-

dents for 21st-century colleges and careers."

In recent years, state leaders have pushed to increase access to school vouchers.

In 2020, North Carolina raised the income eligibility limit and removed a cap on how many vouchers could be given to kindergartners and first graders. These changes likely contributed to more families enrolling in the program said Kathryn Marker, the director of grants, training, and outreach at the North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority.

For now, each private school voucher is worth \$4,200, and a family of four must make less than \$72,700 to be eligible. But North Carolina legislators have passed bills, and more recently budgets, that would increase both figures.

The Senate seeks to bump each voucher's value to \$5,850 while boosting the income eligibility cap for a family to \$85,000. The House is calling for similar increases while allowing individual counties to offer families \$1,000 in additional vouchers.

Whether or not Gov. Roy Cooper signs these changes into law, Kathryn Marker predicts this fall will see more than 20,000 students throughout the state enroll in private schools through this public program.

NC Professors review the textbooks

As North Carolina seeks to grow its voucher program and residents battle over the truths of America's past, the USA Today Network asked nine college professors to read and react to sections of Abeka's and BJU Press's 11th grade U.S. history textbooks.

The selected sections covered topics the professors had specifically researched: Reconstruction, colonialism, Civil Rights, American Indian relations, the Vietnam War, the Industrial Age, and more.

"This is presenting the U.S. with a purity that simply does not exist factually," Greg Weeks, a Latin American Studies professor at UNC-Charlotte, said of Abeka's textbook.

"We're not supposed to be myth tellers, were historians," argued NC State historian David Zonderman, who reviewed both textbooks. "I'm not trying to criticize people's religious beliefs, but you're ill-preparing these children for a world that is complex, a world that is multicultural, a world that is diverse in all kinds of ways."

In its chapter on post-Civil War Reconstruction, the Abeka textbook states the recently freed Black Americans weren't ready for political power: "Under congressional Reconstruction, many Southern whites were barred from voting while former slaves who were not prepared for political responsibility were given full political rights. This often led to unwise conduct of state governments."

"Oh, that's just ridiculous," said UNC historian William Sturkey. "Not prepared for political responsibility - that's an old, paternalist white southerner argument that they (newly freed Blacks) weren't ready for freedom, that they weren't ready to do things like vote or hold jobs."

Addressing the professors' criticisms, Amy Yohe responded that Abeka strives to "ensure that we are accurately repre-

senting (historical) events, and the various people and the various perspectives that would have been included in those events."

Yet the professors feared how the textbooks could shape the way young North Carolinians view present society.

"It's dangerous to think that one racial group cannot function in our democracy, as it excuses virtually any form of disenfranchisement," Sturkey said.

"You end up with a distorted understanding of the American past, and through that distorted understanding of the past, a really nonsensical understanding of the present," said Duke University's Adriene Lentz-Smith. "And that does really pernicious work."

'It comes down to a person's choice'

Mike Long wasn't surprised to hear the college professors had criticized Abeka's history textbook. As head of Parents for Education Freedom in North Carolina, he said, "If they're not taking a biblical worldview to (reviewing the curriculum), I can see that they're going to arrive at their own conclusions."

To Long, the focus should be less on what any curriculum says about certain topics and more on the overarching principle of parental choice.

"It comes down to a person's choice," he said. "It's what works best for their family."

Long, whose organization is listed on the North Carolina Opportunity Scholarship Program website as a resource for families searching for private schools, offered another reason why he feels school choice is paramount: Currently, many families are concerned about "indoctrination" in public schools lessons.

Angie Cutlip, an education consultant near Raleigh, agrees. Through her job, Cutlip guides families through their array of modern K-12 schooling options: district schools, charters, private schools (religious or non-religious), and homeschooling. Cutlip homeschooled her own daughter through Accelerated Christian Education and has seen many students thrive using these "biblical worldview" lessons like BJU Press and Abeka.

"A person can hold biblical viewpoints and still be able to think critically," she said. "Families want to find things that are going to match their core values."

Cutlip is an ardent conservative who in January served as a North Carolina elector in the Electoral College. She believes there were voting irregularities in multiple states that Joe Biden won over Donald Trump. While such claims have repeatedly been proven to be completely baseless, she believes they should be presented in school textbooks.

"If a publisher presents 'no fraud' then the opposite opinion needs to also be represented," she said.

Like picking a school, she said what someone takes as fact - be it about the earth's age or what happened on Election Day 2020 - comes down to a personal decision.

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