

August 5, 2014

Via Email

Edwin Farnsworth
Executive Director
Benjamin Franklin Charter School
efarnsworth@bfcsmail.com

RE: Constitutional violation

Dear Mr. Farnsworth,

Our office has been made aware of a seventh-grade English curriculum that would appear to reflect a significant religious bias, in violation of the Establishment Clause of the United States Constitution. We refer to the 2014-2015 English curriculum of Mrs. Kasten of the Benjamin Franklin Charter School. A copy of the curriculum is attached hereto.

Before discussing the course content, which is itself problematic, we must point out the rather strange historical truths being asserted by the curriculum on its face. The first section of reading material purports to list literature dating from “4000 BC to 300 BC,” then lists as its first example the Old Testament, specifically the books of Genesis and Exodus.¹ No serious academic scholarship, of course, would assert that the Old Testament was written around 4000 BCE or anytime near that date, yet this is what is presented as fact in the syllabus in question.

Outside the realm of fundamentalist religion, it is generally accepted that the Old Testament was written in the first millennium BCE, and more specifically was set down in what is more or less its current form (in Hebrew, not English) between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE.² Thus, one must wonder why the “4000 BC” reference is made by Mrs. Kasten.³

¹ It is noteworthy that Mrs. Kasten utilizes the more religious dating method of “BC” (meaning “Before Christ”) rather than the more objective method of “BCE” (“Before the Common Era”), which is seen with increasing frequency in academia. If this were the only digression it would be insignificant, but coming on top of numerous others, it adds to the perception that the curriculum is being used to promote religion.

² See “The Pentateuch” by Joseph Blenkinsopp in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, Cambridge University Press, John Barton.

³ All parties concerned would presumably concede that Greek mythology, the only other reading material presented in the “4000 BC to 300 BC” section of the curriculum, also does not date to anywhere near 4000 BCE.

The only sensible explanation, it seems, is a religious one. That is, a biblical literalist view might understand the world to be approximately 6000 years old (meaning that Adam and Eve would have dwelled in the Garden of Eden around the year 4000 BCE). Thus, the fact that the Kasten curriculum categorizes Genesis and Exodus as being literature presumably dating back to 4000 BCE is not only misleading and inaccurate, it also seems to reflect an effort to present biblical literalism as truth. Again, this is a view that would be unsupported by any objective academic standard.

Beyond the puzzling dating method that seems to reflect religious bias, Mrs. Kasten's reading material itself raises the same concern. Not only is the entire first quarter of the school year comprised of nothing but the Old Testament and Greek mythology, but as students move to the second quarter, the New Testament then becomes a significant portion of their workload.

With all this Bible material, a parent could reasonably be concerned about how it is going to be presented. Will the Bible's historical inaccuracies and contradictions be taught? How will presentation of the Bible compare to presentation of Greek mythology, given that a significant segment of the class (but not all) will no doubt come from Christian religious backgrounds? Will there be reference to the Bible as the word of God?

Moreover, the religiosity continues as students move into the third quarter, as the highly religious "Pilgrim's Progress" is one of only four reading materials, and in the fourth quarter material from C.S. Lewis, a favorite Christian author, is one of only three items that the children will read.

The pervasiveness of religiosity in this public school setting is of great concern to those parents and children who would prefer that their schools reflect religious neutrality, as required by law. For this reason, we highly recommend that this curriculum be revised and that serious consideration be given to whether an effort is being made here, consciously or not, to promote a Christian agenda. Perhaps Mrs. Kasten, having been educated at a fundamentalist Christian college, gives undue weight to the need to include theological material in her class, and if so the administration must step in to ensure that the curriculum is academically sound and not religiously biased.⁴

Based on the above, at this time we request the following:

1. That the curriculum be revised to correct the dating inaccuracy suggesting the earliest material dates back to 4000 BCE
2. Removal of some or all of the religious material, so that the curriculum does not reflect a Christian bias.
3. Assurance that concerned parents may have their children make audio recordings of Mrs. Kasten's class, as is common practice in academic settings.
4. Assurance that concerned parents may sit in during classes, pursuant to regular school policy, and that they may record classes.

⁴ Hope International University states its mission is "to empower students through Christian higher education to serve the Church and impact the world for Christ."

<http://www.hiu.edu/about/>

5. That Mrs. Kasten's other classes be reviewed to investigate whether religious bias permeates them as well.

We recognize that biblical material may sometimes be studied in public school settings, but context is always important. The sheer quantity of religious material in this class raises concerns. Combine this with the fact that the setting is not a World Religions class (which would be expected to present the material in an objective manner along with material from other religions) but instead is one that presents the religious material to the exclusion of other religions (by a teacher who comes from a fundamentalist Christian academic background) also raises legitimate concerns. As such, we expect that these concerns will be addressed.

The American Humanist Association is a national nonprofit organization, based in Washington, D.C., with over 29,000 members, over 170 chapters and affiliates around the country, and over 300,000 online supporters. The AHA's Appignani Humanist Legal Center has litigated cases in state and federal courts from coast to coast in pursuit of its mission of protecting the rights of humanists and defending the wall of separation between church and state. The legal center includes a network of over 120 cooperating attorneys from all over the country.

Given that the school year has already begun, we ask that you reply within seven (7) days. Feel free to contact our office should you have any questions.

Very truly yours,

Monica Miller, Esq.
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English Syllabus
Mrs. Kasten
2014-2015
jkasten@bfcsmail.com
www.bfhskasten.weebly.com

Course Description

Seventh-grade English will introduce students to some of the greatest works of Western literature. Students will be enthralled by such moral tales and specimens of superb writing as Homer's *Odyssey*, the Old English poem *Beowulf*, plays by William Shakespeare, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and the masterpieces of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens. Exposure to these great works of literary art will not only steep students in stories where virtue is triumphant, but will meantime teach them to write like the greatest of history's authors. Writing experiences will include narrative writing, expository writing (including report and summary writing), note taking, and poetry writing. We will embark on critical discussions of the literature, making connections and gaining skills that will be easily applicable across the subjects and into our daily lives. The course also includes the study of grammar conventions, vocabulary development and oral speaking.

Reading Selections (*Timing subject to change*)

1st Quarter (4000BC-300BC)

Old Testament, selections (Genesis, Exodus)

Evslin, Bernard – Heroes, Gods and Monsters of the Greek Myths (9781631680014)

Homer, *Odyssey* – Lombardo Translation (978-0872204843)

2nd Quarter (300BC-AD600)

New Testament, selections (Acts, Romans, John)

Elizabeth George Spear, *The Bronze Bow* (978-0395137192)

Roger Lancelyn Green, *King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table* (978-0141321011)

3rd Quarter (AD600-1700)

Henrietta Elizabeth Marshall, *The Story of Beowulf* (978-0486454498)

Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (978-0486415918)

Charles and Mary Lamb, *Tales from Shakespeare* (978-1492152286)

John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress* (978-0486426754)

4th Quarter (AD 1700-present)

Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (978-1494382445)

Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (978-0486424538)

C.S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (978-0743234900)

Materials Needed

- *Blue and/or black pens (*Please refrain from purchasing any other colored pens or pencils for English – work done in anything but blue/black pen will be marked down*)
- *Red pens
- *Highlighter(s)
- *2 spiral notebooks, college ruled, designated for English only
- *Loose leaf notebook paper, college ruled
- *Kleenex
- *2+ expo markers (blue, green, red or black – for student work on white board)

Homework

Students should anticipate homework being assigned every night in English, including weekends and holidays. Typically homework will consist of reading the current novel being studied in preparation for the following day's class discussion. Homework could also consist of writing and/or grammar assignments. Homework assignments will be explained in class and should be written in the appropriate space in the student's agenda. Homework will also be listed on the class website for your convenience – www.bfhskasten.weebly.com Please keep in mind that although assignments will be placed on the website for up to a week in advance, daily requirements will depend on the amount of content covered in class. The teacher reserves the right to make changes according to the overall pace of the class.

Absent & Late Work

All assignments must be completed. All students shall be provided with two days from day of absence to make up missed assignments, not including long-term assignments. Assignments will be due at the beginning of the class period on the deadline provided by the teacher. After this time 0% will be given. No late work is accepted.

English Grade Weights

- 25% Participation
Points given to students who are prepared for class – this includes students having their copy of the book in class with them every day. Classroom behavior and spiral notebooks are also evaluated in this area.
- 15% Homework
Make grammar and other short term assignments
- 15% Quizzes
Includes, but is not limited to: Make grammar quizzes, reading comprehension quizzes, vocabulary quizzes and Socratic seminars.
- 20% Essays and Long-Term Assignments
- 25% Midterm (December 2014) and Final (May 2015)

Grading

90-100%	A
80-89%	B
70-79%	C
60-69%	D
59% below	F

Rules

1. Be in your seat with all necessary materials when the bell rings
2. Listen to your teacher and classmates respectfully
3. Raise your hand for permission to speak or leave your seat
4. Be responsible for yourself and for our classroom

Consequences

1st Warning, name written down

2nd Warning, check placed next to name, participation points lost

*Students who behave inappropriately will get 2 warnings and, if the behavior continues, will be issued an after school detention and/or another consequence at the teacher's discretion

**Severe behavior will be referred to the principal's office immediately.