Tuesday, February 25, 2025

Superintendent Ryan Walters
Oliver Hodge Building
2500 North Lincoln Boulevard, Suite 118
Oklahoma City, OK 73105-4504

Oklahoma State Board of Education
Ryan Deatherage
Michael Tinney
Chris VanDenhende
Sarah Lepak
Zachary Archer

Re: Interfaith communities and religious freedom advocates oppose inappropriate promotion of Christianity in Oklahoma's revised social studies standards

Dear Superintendent Walters and members of the State Board of Education,

We, the undersigned religious, spiritual, ethical, and nonreligious communities and religious freedom advocates, write to you to express our opposition to the Oklahoma Department of Education's revised social studies standards, which were released to the public in December 2024 and will be considered for approval by the State Board of Education on February 27, 2025. After careful review of the draft academic standards for social studies, we believe that the representation of religious, spiritual, ethical, and nonreligious traditions and communities within the standards improperly and erroneously privileges Christianity. This favoring of one faith tradition in public education violates Oklahomans' right to religious freedom, which is protected by both the U.S. and Oklahoma Constitutions. We implore the Oklahoma State Board of Education to reject these proposed standards and instruct the Oklahoma Department of Education to further review and amend the standards to eliminate the biased prioritization of Christianity and its portrayal as the only religious tradition that has impacted American history and civic life.

While the Department of Education's draft social studies standards claim to address a broader understanding of religions, the curriculum is just another attempt by Superintendent Walters to disproportionately emphasize Christianity, and more specifically, the Christian Bible. Recently, Superintendent Walters proposed a multi-million dollar, taxpayer-funded purchase of more than 55,000 Bibles for public school classrooms in Oklahoma. As you are aware, public schools are constitutionally obligated to remain neutral in matters of religion; doing so helps to ensure that all students, regardless of their beliefs, background and worldview, feel respected and included. Purchasing these Bibles demonstrates that Superintendent Walters wants to emphasize Christianity, which will undoubtedly alienate students and families from non-Christian backgrounds and violate their constitutionally protected rights to a public education free from religious proselytization.

Likewise, Superintendent Walters' mandatory video announcement for the "Department of Religious Freedom and Patriotism" misuses public education to promote a Christian agenda by focusing on a religious text. The video includes him leading a Christian prayer in classrooms,

which—despite him asserting that students are not required to participate—still clearly violates the constitutional prohibition on coercing public school students to pray. The U.S. Constitution requires that public schools teach about religion in an academic, objective, and inclusive manner, rather than promote any specific religious practice or faith tradition. Such actions risk fostering divisiveness and placing undue pressure on students of different faiths or non-religious backgrounds.

Superintendent Walters has also claimed that the proposed inclusion of Christianity within the state's social studies standards serves to more accurately reflect our country's history by including Christianity's influence in U.S. history curricula. Unfortunately, the standards promote Christianity not only by inaccurately overemphasizing its influence on the Founding but also by failing to acknowledge that *many* diverse religious, spiritual, and ethical traditions have played a role in the founding and flourishing of our nation. In fact, our nation's foremost public educational institutions acknowledge the significant role that other religious traditions, such as Islam and African and Indigenous spiritualities, have played in the founding of the United States and development of our country's religious freedom tradition. If the accuracy of public school academic standards is the Department of Education's primary concern, then a comprehensive world religions education that includes an academic and objective representation of various religious, spiritual, and ethical traditions represented in Oklahoma's communities should be the Department's priority.

During the period of public comment on the Department's draft standards, members of the Coalition for Religious Freedom in Public Schools reviewed the standards in depth and submitted the below feedback:

- Standard 2.2.5: Requires students to learn about Christianity's influence on American colonists but excludes other religions traditions present in colonial America, such as Islam, Judaism, and Indigenous spiritual practices.
- Standards 5.2.4, 8.1.5F, MWH.1.2C, and USG.2.1B: Emphasize Judeo-Christian values in the nation's founding while omitting key concepts like the separation of church and state and the influence of non-Judeo-Christian traditions, for various grade levels starting at grade 5 all the way to grade 12.
- Standards for Grade 7: Prioritizes Judaism and Christianity—particularly Christianity's modern role—while offering only broad overviews of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam.
- General: Sikhism is also entirely absent from the elementary and middle school world religion education. Overall, Sikhism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism receive minimal acknowledgment. In contrast, "Christian" or "Christianity" appear 30 times, covering various aspects in-depth, including influence on world history and comparisons to other faiths.

Given that the final academic standards for social studies adopted by the Oklahoma Board of Education and Oklahoma Legislature will affect the development of curricula and lesson plans for the next five years, we hold grave concerns about the quality of education that children will receive if the current proposed standards are approved by both bodies. We urge you to consider

the long-term damage that the current draft social studies standards could inflict on the intellectual and emotional development of Oklahoma's students and ask that you reject the draft academic standards for social studies as they currently stand.

Respectfully submitted,

Oklahoma-based Communities, Organizations, Houses of Worship & Faith Leaders

ACLU of Oklahoma

All Saints Catholic Church and The Old Catholic Diocese of Mid-America

All Souls Unitarian Church

American Atheists, Oklahoma

Congregation B'nai Emunah, Tulsa

The Cooperating Baptist Fellowship of Oklahoma

Emanuel Synagogue

Fellowship Congregational UCC

First Unitarian Church, Oklahoma City

Forest Park Christian Church

Freedom Oklahoma

Mayflower Congregational UCC

NorthHaven Church

Oklahoma Appleseed Center for Law and Justice

Oklahoma Faith Network

Oklahoma State Representative Mickey Dollens

The Parish Church of St. Jerome

Sikh Gurdwara of Tulsa

Rev. David Wiggs, United Methodist

Rev. Jack Terrell-Wilkes

Rabbi Vered Harris, Edmond

William Bruce Prescott, Retired Baptist Minister

The Coalition for Religious Freedom in Public Schools

American Atheists

American Civil Liberties Union Foundation

American Humanist Association

Americans United for Separation of Church and State

Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

Hindus for Human Rights

Interfaith Alliance

Muslim Public Affairs Council

Sikh Coalition

Additional Signatories: National Organizations

Good Faith Media