

Serving Texas

Students by

Seeking

Historical

Accuracy

About Jews,

Judaism &

Israel in

Textbooks &

Curricula

In Profile: The Institute for Curriculum Services

By: Aliza Cramer Elias, Director

With Passover recently behind us, imagine reading in a 6th grade textbook that Passover is a celebration of the killing of the Egyptian firstborn. Or imagine reading that the Jews crucified Jesus. These were a few of the inaccurate descriptions relating to Judaism that the founders of the Institute for Curriculum Services (ICS) discovered in social studies textbooks.

The impetus for taking a closer look at history textbooks came about when California decided to reintroduce teaching about religions in public schools in 1989. This look at California textbooks, quickly spread beyond California as the same problematic themes repeated themselves around the country. While millions of American K-12 students learn about Jews, Judaism, and Israel each year in the public schools, prior to ICS, there was no national, organized effort to improve the accuracy of the content.

Enter ICS. ICS was launched in late 2005 with a mission of improving the accuracy of K-12 education nationally. ICS began just in time to work on California's selection (known as an adoption) of social studies textbooks. As the largest three states with statewide textbook adoptions, California, Texas, and Florida, for years have had a disproportionate influence on the textbook market (publishers gear their books to their largest markets). Texas is particularly important because it adopts K-12 textbooks on a statewide basis. This realization, coupled with ICS's strong connection with the JCRC of Greater Dallas, led to the creation of the Public Education Initiative (PEI) in 2009. PEI shares ICS's mission of promoting accurate and balanced instruction and instructional materials about Jews, Judaism, and Israel in K-12 education, with a unique focus on Texas. At the same time, as a national resource, ICS assists Jewish communities around the country to promote accurate information on Jews, Judaism, and Israel in standards, textbooks, and through curriculum development and teacher training. **(IN PROFILE continued on page 2)**

**DID YOU HEAR?
PEI IS ON FACEBOOK**

"Like" PEI at

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/publiceducationinitiative/>

OR SEARCH

Public Education Initiative

HOT TOPICS: Prayer at Graduations

By: Pat Epstein

Prayer at graduation is a two-pronged issue: It's illegal if sponsored by the school district; it "may" be legal if offered by a student speaker.

DISTRICT SPONSORED PRAYER AT GRADUATION

It happens every May: A school district somewhere (usually in smaller, more homogeneous communities) decides to include prayer in their graduation ceremony. The astonishing thing is that this continues twenty-two years after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the practice unconstitutional (*Lee v. Weisman*, 1992).¹

Lee v. Weisman concerned a middle-school graduation in Providence, RI where the school "designed the program, provided for the invocation, selected the clergy, and even supplied guidelines for the prayer."² The Court held that this practice "violated the First Amendment's prohibition against laws 'respecting the establishment of religion'," basing their decision on the fact that "1) it is not the business of schools to sponsor or organize religious activities, and 2) students who might have objected to the prayer were subtly coerced to participate."³ It is important to note that voluntary attendance at graduation was not sufficient criteria for the Court; the Justices recognized that most students would want to attend the culminating point of their academic lives.

In this context, the issue is cut-and-dried: school districts *may not* sponsor prayer at graduations. On the other hand, private entities, e.g., churches, are free to sponsor their own Baccalaureate services and include as many prayers and devotional tunes as they want. Students and teachers are free to attend these activities. **(HOT TOPICS continued on page 2)**

EDITION 3
SPRING
2014



THE POWER of PARENTS

By: Talia Kushnick

As the Outreach Liaison for PEI, I have a lot of different opportunities, but my favorite is the time I spend meeting with parents. I enjoy interacting and hearing about their experiences as Jewish families in public education. We laugh, we groan, and we talk through challenges they and their children sometimes face in the classroom or the larger school context. But mostly, I am inspired. I am inspired by the parents I meet, and their desire to make public schools a better and safer place for all children.

As parents, you have a wonderful opportunity to impact the educational experiences of your children. By showing up, offering your help, and letting the teachers know that you are available to lend a hand, you put yourself in a position of power. Your proximity gives you the ability to work with the teachers and educational professionals to effect change and help mold public schools into places that are sensitive to the needs and lifestyles of all the children they serve. Put another way, your involvement and volunteerism make you one of the “deciders”.

Over the past few months, I have seen parents do extraordinary things for their children and the schools they attend. I have seen parents advocate for accuracy in lessons, speak out against church/state violations in the schools, and work with teachers to make their classrooms safer and more accepting of the diverse group of students they serve. I am constantly impressed.

Parents are powerful.

HOT TOPICS: Prayer at Graduations (from page 1)

STUDENT PRAYER AT GRADUATION

This is where the issue gets more complicated. There are those who believe that student religious speech at a graduation or other school events violates the Establishment Clause and feel that *Santa Fe v. Doe*⁴ bolsters this case (see the *PEI Newsletter*, Fall 2014). However, there are also those who contend that prohibiting students from expressing themselves religiously violates their free exercise of religion and free speech rights.

Some schools may allow the valedictorian or class president to speak at graduation. Under current law, “if the student speaker was chosen by neutral criteria and given primary control of his or her speech, i.e., not reviewed or edited by the school,”⁵ any religious content, including prayer, would likely be considered legal. Districts that opt to allow students to speak freely are advised to put a disclaimer in their programs explaining that the student’s comments reflect their own views and not those of the district.

One way for districts to accommodate prayer at graduation is to provide a neutral moment of silence during which time attendees may pray, meditate, or reflect.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

Parents with questions and concerns about their district’s policy regarding prayer at graduation can do the following:

- Contact your district’s Administration Office and request a copy of the district’s policy regarding prayer at graduation. Larger districts will likely refer you to their Communications Department.
- Contact your school leadership. Ask for the district policy governing prayer at graduation. More specifically, ask how the school leadership addresses the issue. Do they review the student speeches? Do they allow for a moment of silence?
- If you are interested, find out if there are faith-based Baccalaureate or similar “services” offered for students.
- Contact PEI if you have questions or would like guidance.

¹ *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992).

² <http://www.firstamendmentschools.org/freedoms/faq.aspx?id=12811>

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Santa Fe Independent Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2000).

⁵ <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/graduation-prayer-fighting-over-a-lost-cause>



WHAT CAN PEI
DO FOR YOU?

- Connect you with other public school parents to build an active, engaged, and effective Jewish parent network in your community.
- Provide information and guidance to help you become an effective advocate in your children’s schools.
- Provide resources to share with the leadership and teachers in your schools.
- Promote accurate resources for Texas students at the State Board of Education and the Texas Legislature.
- Provide educators with accurate resources and materials regarding Jews, Judaism, and Israel.
- Serve as your connection to accessing information about what is and is not legal regarding religion in public schools, and provide guidance if issues do arise.

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ICS In Profile (from page 1)

At the end of the day, ICS is fueled by the conviction that more accurate textbooks on Jewish content benefit not only the Jewish community, but the broader community including our nation’s future leaders. ICS nationally, together with PEI in Texas, addresses the roots of antisemitism and anti-Israel misinformation. This work is critical to ensuring both a secure Jewish future and a democratic and civil society for all. For more information on ICS’s free educational resources, please visit:

www.icsresources.org/edmaterials.htm.