

Dismissed! To Study the Bible Released Time Programs

Chuck Colson
BREAKPOINT
March 27, 2008

Eric was a little boy who did not have much going for him. His older brother was in prison, and he had never known his father. He had never been to church in his life.

According to the experts and the statistics, Eric was headed straight for a life of crime. But last year Eric got a break. He lives in Pennsylvania, where, some 40 years ago, a group of Christians began a Released Time Bible Program in the public schools.

Pennsylvania has a generous released time law, and Eric's mother gave permission for her son to take part. Volunteers take Eric and his classmates out of school once a week and walk them to a nearby church. There, they enjoy singing, Bible study, prayer, and Scripture memorization. Eric has become close to one of the adults who teaches his class and has had dinner with his family several times. And last summer, Eric earned enough points from Scripture memory to cover the cost of a week of Christian camp. He cannot wait to get back there this summer.

Nancy Derrick, one of this year's class of Centurions—the year-long worldview training program that we run—is a regional coordinator for Joy El Ministries' Released Time Bible Program in Pennsylvania. She says that fully half the kids who take part in Released Time programs are unchurched.

Clearly, even parents who do not attend church themselves recognize that Bible lessons are good for their kids. This is tremendously important because those who study crime tell us that criminal behavior is a result of a lack of moral training in the morally formative years. Well, moral training is a big part of Pennsylvania's Released Time Bible Program; volunteers both model and teach godly character.

Kids who participate in Released Time often have chaotic home lives and lack meaningful relationships with adults. It is not unusual for these kids to form strong relationships with Released Time volunteers. This means kids from broken homes have a chance to see firsthand what healthy

family relationships look like. Far better to have crime-prone kids bonding with Christian families instead of the gangs.

Through Joy El Ministries' program alone, some 3,000 kids from 25 school districts in Pennsylvania are reached every week with God's Word—and the program just keeps growing.

All too often, public school officials do everything they can to keep Christian influences out of the classroom because they consider Christianity a bigoted faith for the foolish. That is why programs like Released Time classes are so important. Five years ago, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency studied Released Time programs and found that kids who take part in Released Time perform better academically than their peers. It also found the program reinforced positive moral and character development in schools where teachers struggle to control disruptive students.

If one were a cynic, one might say Released Time volunteers are doing the work of the schools for them—for free!

Is there a Released Time program in your state? If there is not, why not start one? No special training is needed, and the courts have upheld challenges to the law. You can find out more about the Released Time Bible Program by coming to our website.

It is a chance to bring the Gospel into schools—and bring the crime rate down. That is not bad for a few hours volunteering each week. How about it? ■

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