

Senate File 139 - Introduced

SENATE FILE 139

BY GUTH

A BILL FOR

1 An Act relating to elective social studies courses emphasizing
2 religious scripture that school districts may offer and
3 teach.

4 BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF IOWA:

1 Section 1. Section 256.7, Code 2023, is amended by adding
2 the following new subsection:

3 NEW SUBSECTION. 35. Adopt rules establishing course
4 standards for elective social studies courses listed in
5 paragraph "a", any of which a school district may offer and
6 teach to students in grades nine through twelve subject to
7 the provisions of section 279.50B. The rules shall include
8 practitioner preparation and professional development
9 requirements for practitioners employed by a school district to
10 teach a course listed under paragraph "a".

11 a. (1) A course on the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old
12 Testament of the Bible.

13 (2) A course on the New Testament of the Bible.

14 (3) A course on the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old Testament
15 of the Bible and the New Testament of the Bible.

16 b. A school district may offer and teach a course listed in
17 paragraph "a" for all of the following purposes:

18 (1) To provide students with knowledge of biblical content,
19 characters, poetry, and narratives that are prerequisites to
20 understanding contemporary society and culture, including but
21 not limited to literature, art, music, mores, oratory, and
22 public policy.

23 (2) To familiarize students with, as applicable, the
24 following:

25 (a) The contents of the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old
26 Testament of the Bible or the New Testament of the Bible.

27 (b) The history of the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old
28 Testament of the Bible or the New Testament of the Bible.

29 (c) The literary style and structure of the Hebrew
30 Scriptures or the Old Testament of the Bible or the New
31 Testament of the Bible.

32 (d) The influence of the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old
33 Testament of the Bible or the New Testament of the Bible on
34 law, history, government, literature, art, music, customs,
35 morals, values, and culture.

1 c. In complying with this subsection, the state board shall
2 not violate any provision of law as defined in section 17A.2.
3 A course offered and taught in accordance with this section is
4 subject to federal and state guidelines regarding religious
5 neutrality and the diverse religious views, traditions, and the
6 perspectives of students enrolled in the school district shall
7 be recognized and accommodated. A course offered and taught
8 in accordance with this subsection shall not endorse, favor,
9 promote, or disfavor, or be hostile toward, any particular
10 religion, faith, or nonreligious perspective.

11 Sec. 2. NEW SECTION. **279.50B Elective social studies**
12 **courses — religious scripture.**

13 1. If the board of directors of a school district considers
14 and approves, by majority vote of the membership of the school
15 board, a recommendation from the school improvement advisory
16 committee that an elective social studies course be offered and
17 taught in accordance with section 280.12, subsection 4, such a
18 course may be offered and taught in the school district.

19 2. A student enrolled in a course offered and taught
20 pursuant to section 256.7, subsection 35, and this section,
21 shall not be required to use a specific translation as the
22 sole text for the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old Testament
23 of the Bible, or the New Testament of the Bible for the
24 course, and may use instead a translation other than the text
25 chosen for the course by the teacher, the school improvement
26 advisory committee, the school district, or the state board of
27 education.

28 3. A school improvement advisory committee appointed in
29 accordance with section 280.12, or the principal of a school
30 offering an elective social studies course in accordance with
31 section 256.7, subsection 35, and this section, may authorize
32 the display of historic artifacts, monuments, symbols, and
33 texts, including religious materials, in conjunction with
34 the course if such display is appropriate to the overall
35 educational purpose of the course and is consistent with the

1 provisions of section 280.6.

2 4. In offering and teaching a course in accordance with
3 section 256.7, subsection 35, and this section, a school
4 district shall not knowingly violate any provision of law as
5 defined in section 17A.2. A course offered in accordance with
6 section 256.7, subsection 35, and this section, is subject to
7 federal and state guidelines regarding religious neutrality,
8 and the diverse religious views, traditions, and the course so
9 offered shall recognize and acknowledge the perspectives of
10 students enrolled in the school district. The course shall not
11 endorse, favor, promote, or disfavor, or be hostile toward, any
12 particular religion, faith, or nonreligious perspective.

13 Sec. 3. Section 280.12, Code 2023, is amended by adding the
14 following new subsection:

15 NEW SUBSECTION. 4. Consider a recommendation from the
16 school improvement advisory committee that an elective social
17 studies course which meets the requirements and purposes set
18 forth in section 256.7, subsection 35, be offered and taught in
19 the school district in accordance with section 279.50B.

20 EXPLANATION

21 The inclusion of this explanation does not constitute agreement with
22 the explanation's substance by the members of the general assembly.

23 This bill directs the state board of education to adopt
24 rules establishing course standards for elective social studies
25 courses on the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old or New Testament of
26 the Bible. The bill authorizes a school district to offer and
27 teach such a course to students in grades 9 through 12 if the
28 district's school improvement advisory committee recommends,
29 and the board of directors of the school district approves, the
30 course.

31 The purpose of the course must be to provide students
32 with knowledge of biblical content, characters, poetry, and
33 narratives that are prerequisites to understanding contemporary
34 society and culture, and to familiarize students with the
35 contents, history, literary style and structure, and influence

1 of the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old or New Testament of the
2 Bible.

3 The state board's rules must include practitioner
4 preparation and professional development requirements for
5 practitioners employed by a school district to teach such a
6 course.

7 Under the bill, the state board and school districts are
8 prohibited from violating any provision of law in complying
9 with the provisions of the bill. A course offered under the
10 bill is subject to federal and state guidelines regarding
11 religious neutrality, and shall recognize and accommodate the
12 diverse religious views, traditions, and the perspectives of
13 students enrolled in the school district. Such a course shall
14 not endorse, favor, promote, or disfavor, or be hostile toward,
15 any particular religion, faith, or nonreligious perspective.

16 If a school improvement advisory committee recommends such a
17 course, the school board must consider the recommendation. To
18 offer and teach such a course, the school board must approve
19 the recommendation by majority vote of its membership.

20 A student enrolled in such a course shall not be required
21 to use a specific translation as the sole text for the Hebrew
22 Scriptures or the Old or New Testament of the Bible.

23 A school improvement advisory committee or the principal of
24 a school offering such a course may authorize the display of
25 historic artifacts, monuments, symbols, and texts, including
26 religious materials, in conjunction with the course if such
27 display is appropriate to the overall educational purpose of
28 the course and does not require a child to read religious books
29 contrary to the wishes of the child's parent or guardian.
30 Under current law, religious text books such as the Bible, the
31 Torah, and the Koran shall not be excluded from any public
32 school.