

A National Summit on Religion and Education

Sept. 27, 2019
Religious Freedom Center
of the Freedom Forum Institute
Washington, D.C.

A National Summit on Religion and Education

This program was organized by

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This program was co-convened with



This program was made possible by generous support from



This document was prepared by
Benjamin Marcus, Dr. Kate Soules and David Callaway.

Executive Summary

On Sept. 27, 2019, experts gathered at the Newseum in Washington, D.C., for a National Summit on Religion and Education to discuss the past, present and future of K-12 religious studies education in the United States.

Religious studies education includes academic, constitutional, multi- and inter-disciplinary study about religion that educates and informs students about various religions. Religious studies education neither promotes nor denigrates religion. The summit did not take up questions related to devotional *religious education* that seeks to inculcate specific religious beliefs or practices (see the National Council for the Social Studies, 2017).

The summit was organized by the Religious Freedom Center of the Freedom Forum Institute and co-hosted by the American Academy of Religion (AAR), the National Council for the Social Studies and Boston College's Lynch School of Education and Human Development. Funding for the summit was generously provided by the Templeton Religion Trust and the Foundation for Religious Literacy.

The summit brought together an inter- and multi-disciplinary group that included leaders in the fields of education, religious studies, social studies and English language arts. Participants included teachers, school and district administrators, professional development and curricular resource providers, religious and civic advocacy organizations, scholars, publishers and philanthropists. For a full list of participants and titles, see Appendix A.

Summit attendees identified eight major action items to improve religious studies education in the United States. Sub-action items are identified later in the document, along with key stakeholders who are well positioned to make a difference.

1. **Establish field cohesion** among those who work at the intersection of religion and education in order to work more effectively and efficiently.
2. **Conduct research, collect data and publish findings** about current practices and impacts of religious studies education and professional development for K-12 educators.
3. **Create and implement an outreach strategy** for the field and existing resources in order to increase the number of educators and institutions committed to the study of religion.
4. **Institutionalize policies** that encourage and guide religious studies education and religious literacy for all educators.
5. **Expand and strengthen pre-service teacher education** to increase attention to religious diversity and add religious studies for teachers in all content areas.

6. **Expand and strengthen in-service teacher education** about religious studies and religious diversity.
7. **Organize a resource clearinghouse** to collect existing and future high-quality curriculum and professional support/development opportunities.
8. **Engage face-to-face and online communities** to nurture broad support for religious studies education within and beyond the traditional school day.

Some individuals and organizations have resources — financial, human and otherwise — to begin work immediately. Other organizations are well positioned to make an impact, but they lack the bandwidth to move ahead. **We affirm that long-term success requires a commitment by institutions to fund the field of religious studies education.** This white paper signifies an agreement of priorities for the future of the field among the signatories in Appendix B. We call upon philanthropists, foundations and relevant government agencies to support initiatives that have a strong potential of addressing the eight action items listed here.

We also invite individuals and organizations who are interested in this shared work to identify themselves so that we may include them in future conversations. We especially invite them to commit publicly to specific action items, either alone or in coalition with others. Please join the conversation by emailing the Religious Freedom Center at religion@freedomforum.org.

Purpose and Goals of the Summit

In 2017, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) published an American Academy of Religion-approved Religious Studies Companion Document to the College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. This was a watershed moment in the history of religion and education. For the first time, a mainstream education organization offered a framework and learning objectives for the academic, constitutional study of religion in American schools. NCSS expanded upon this publication in 2019 with a book, “Teaching About Religion in the Social Studies Classroom.”

Two years out from the publication of the Religious Studies Companion Document, we gathered leaders in the fields of religion and education to discuss the state of the field and identify opportunities for growth. Never before had leaders from these various groups met together to discuss our shared work. Each attendee offered unique perspectives about the successes and challenges in the field.

The day-long summit had three primary objectives:

- Gather an interdisciplinary group of stakeholders to take stock of the current work in religion and education;
- Brainstorm directions for the future of the field;
- Build relationships across disciplines and organizations.

Summary of the Summit

Tina Heafner offered introductory remarks. During the first half of the day, summit participants discussed the current state of religion and education in American schools. Alice Hunt moderated a panel on the topic that included John Camardella, Maha Elgenaidi, Sarabih Levy-Brightman, Benjamin P. Marcus and Michael D. Waggoner (See Appendix A). Two sets of small-group discussions followed, facilitated by Larry Paska on the topics, “What are we already doing — and doing well?” and “What could we be doing better?”

Maureen Costello facilitated a debrief over lunch to determine, “What have we learned so far?” In the second half of the day, participants explored the future of K-12 religious studies education in American schools. Charles Haynes moderated the opening panel for the afternoon, which included Sufia Azmat, Mark Chancey, Bernadine Futrell, Mary Juzwik and Kelly O’Riley. Two sets of small-group discussions followed, facilitated by Dennis Shirley, under the titles, “What are the top priorities in the field?” and “How can we better work together?” Stephen Prothero led a closing debrief in which he pointed out significant agreements and disagreements in the room before proposing some action items for the field.

List of participants and the organizations they represented at the Summit ([Appendix A, page 18](#))

A list of important abbreviations and acronyms can be found on [page 15](#).

The Current State of Religion and Education

Religion has been inextricably linked with education from the earliest schools in North America. The present conversations about religion and education, however, can be traced to legal and curricular changes that began in the mid-20th century. These changes included the separation of release-time devotional religious education courses from the public schools and the elimination of school-sponsored devotional practices. At the same time, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed in its 1963 decision, *School District of Abington Township, Pennsylvania v. Schempp*, that the academic study of religion was permitted and even crucial to a well-rounded education. From the opinion of Associate Justice Tom Clark, who wrote for the Court:

[I]t might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.

In the following decades, there have been various initiatives directed at religion in U.S. public schools. The National Council on Religion and Public Education (1971-1994) provided structure and organization to the field and established key research outlets. Great strides were made when the First Amendment Center published several consensus documents that stressed a civic approach to religion in public schools. The framers of these documents recognized that education about religion, and the protection of First Amendment rights in schools, play a vital role in modeling how people across the religious and political spectrum can live with their deepest differences. The U.S. Department of Education sent five consensus documents to every public school in the nation in 2000 (see Haynes, 2009; Marcus, 2017).

The current era of scholarship and advocacy can be traced to the publication of several important books and documents in the late 2000s (e.g. Moore, 2007; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2007; Prothero, 2007; American Academy of Religion, 2010). Most recently, the 2017 publication of the Religious Studies Companion Document to the C3 Framework highlights growing awareness of the study of religion as part of core subject areas. Several new in-service professional development programs have been implemented in the past five years.

While there have been many positive developments, the field still lacks cohesion and suffers from a fractured body of work and community of scholars and educators. A paucity of data about the number, type and effect of K-12 religious studies courses and curricula hinders our work. We would also benefit from further research about the

relationship between religious literacy and learning outcomes in subjects that include social studies and English language arts. The remainder of this paper identifies eight action items that we believe can strengthen the field of religion and education and answer some of the most important questions with which we continue to wrestle.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER AS A FIELD:

- What are the goals of religious studies education?
- How do we define religious literacy? Are the multiple definitions compatible within the overall goals?
- What barriers need to be removed in order to teach religion effectively and take religion seriously?
- Who are our allies in this work?

ACTION ITEMS

The following items are not in any particular order. Goals within each of the following overlap and build on each other.

1. Establish field cohesion among those who work at the intersection of religion and education in order to work more effectively and efficiently.

The field of religious studies education currently suffers from the absence of a center of gravity. There are numerous individuals and organizations committed to improving the academic, constitutional study of religion in schools, but they do not (a) work together efficiently or (b) agree on the goals of religious studies education. Stakeholders often work in silos, leading many to feel that they cannot advocate effectively for systemic, structural change. Working in isolation also prevents some from identifying themselves with a field of religious studies education. Instead they see themselves in another field (e.g. social studies, education, English language arts) with a side interest in religion.

We need to establish field cohesion and we need to define our goals. What are we trying to accomplish, and why does it matter? While we expect disagreements on some issues, we should attempt to find common ground. Goals may include: (1) introducing stand-alone religious studies courses; (2) integrating religious studies into social studies, English language arts and other curricula; (3) improving educators' religious literacy and legal literacy vis-à-vis religion, the First Amendment and education; (4) including religion in diversity and equity plans, research and training; and (5) forging connections between disciplines (e.g. education, religious studies, social studies, English language arts) and between K-12 schools and higher education. We will all benefit from collaboration. By defining our goals and building field cohesion, we can advocate more effectively, as a unified front, with key stakeholders.

PRIORITY TASKS

- Begin planning a summit for 2020 co-sponsored by a larger number of organizations. Having more sponsors will reduce the burden on each organization and increase the likelihood of bringing in perspectives that are often left out of conversations about religion and education. Establish an ongoing steering committee that includes leaders in education, religious studies, social studies and English/language arts.
- Co-locate the annual conferences of the American Academy of Religion and the National Council for the Social Studies. These conferences happen on the same weekend every other year. Co-locating the conferences — and encouraging joint sessions — will facilitate collaboration and cross-pollination of ideas among their respective members. (Note: It is worth exploring the possibility of joint conferences with English language arts educators and scholars as well).
- Create an online platform displaying this white paper and identifying the coalition of individuals and organizations that have signed on to its principles, following the models of CivX Now and the Civics Renewal Network. Invite others to sign the white paper. Leverage this coalition to ensure continued collaboration to achieve proposed outcomes.

2. Conduct research, collect data and publish findings about current practices and impacts of religious studies education and professional development for K-12 educators.

A critical factor limiting the cohesion of a field of religious studies education is a lack of data about what is actually happening in K-12 schools and teacher education programs across the country. Much of the existing knowledge and initiatives are based on anecdotal evidence concentrated in a handful of geographic locations. Although recent national-level studies (Pew, Phi Delta Kappa) have demonstrated the need for and interest in improved religious studies education at the K-12 level, these studies do not provide enough depth to truly understand current practices, and their impacts, related to religious studies education.

Several key questions need to be investigated through rigorous, empirical research: What is currently happening in classrooms? What do teachers know about religion and what are their attitudes toward religion? What are teachers learning about religion at the pre-service level and through in-service professional development? What do students know about religion and what do they want to know? What are the exemplars in the field? What are the impacts of those courses or professional development that have been identified as exemplars? The complexity of the U.S. public education system will require that large-scale research on these questions and others be conducted through partnerships and collaboration with teams of research. The European REDCo project demonstrates the value of collaboration to gather data across a wide range of contexts and could serve as a model for a similar project in the U.S.

PRIORITY TASKS

- Identify a multi-disciplinary team of researchers to develop a large-scale study of religion and education in the U.S. A national collaborative research project will provide significant insight into the above questions. Interdisciplinary relationships among researchers will also broaden the reach of findings and increase awareness of work in religion and education in several related fields.
- Identify funding sources for empirical research on religion and education. Making funding available for both small- and large-scale research will encourage the development of collaborative projects and enable graduate students and early career researchers to remain in this field, rather than shifting towards better-resourced areas of research.
- Identify exemplars to serve as case studies. Investigating the effects of exemplar courses or programs can serve to strengthen arguments for the value of religious studies education. The findings of such research can also disseminate best practices to other schools.

3. Create and implement an outreach strategy for the field and existing resources in order to increase the number of educators and institutions committed to the study of religion.

Unlike most other subjects taught in public schools today, religious studies as a discipline is almost unheard of amongst teachers, students, district leaders and parents. Many stakeholders are only familiar with devotional approaches to religion, which are constitutionally inappropriate for the classroom and often do not incorporate the skills and tools of the field of religious studies. Compounding this issue, educators enter the public school system with little-to-no pre-service training related to religious studies, making most unaware of their own deficits when teaching about religion. For religious studies education to spread and improve in public schools, we must create a greater public understanding of the field and its relevance to all students.

An outreach strategy that addresses this gap in teacher training and community understanding can have a huge impact on the attention given by districts to religious studies education. Such a strategy should: (1) introduce stakeholders to religious studies as an academic field with methodologies and literature relevant to public schools; (2) address the need for and value of religious literacy in creating college-, career- and civic-ready students; and (3) raise awareness amongst the various organizations working towards better religious studies education to increase field cohesion and cooperation. Greater awareness will also encourage ancillary organizations like National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), American Association of School Administrators (AASA)/The School Superintendents Association and ASCD to devote more resources to religious studies education bringing in new and varied partners to this work.

PRIORITY TASKS

- Foster support for more public media about religious literacy and its role in a comprehensive education through social media, documentaries and classroom resources.
- Increase the number of presentations/panels at a range of related conferences to bring the field of religious studies education to the attention of more audiences.
- Create partnerships with initiatives such as AASA's Redefining Ready or the National Writing Project that are already connected to vast amounts of stakeholders and can therefore increase interest and awareness through existing channels of information. The focus of the outreach strategy might change for different stakeholders, some of whom might demonstrate an interest in religious studies courses and curriculum and some of whom might relate to messaging about religious diversity and inclusion in curricula.

4. Institutionalize policies that encourage and guide religious studies education.

Advocates for religious studies education have published consensus statements, guidance documents and policy papers that have had a profound impact on the field. Past documents include: AAR's Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Public Schools (2010); Society of Biblical Literature (SBL)'s Bible Electives in Public Schools: A Guide (2009); the OSCE's Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching About Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools (2007); and the First Amendment Center's Finding Common Ground (Haynes & Thomas, 2011). Recently, key documents published include NCSS's Religious Studies Companion Document to the C3 Framework (2017), NCSS's Teaching About Religion in the Social Studies Classroom (2019), and AAR's Religious Literacy Guidelines for College Graduates (2019).

If we intend to institutionalize religious studies education across educational institutions, we need to nurture top-down, middle-out and bottom-up policy initiatives within mainstream education organizations including accreditation bodies, professional and learned societies and state agencies. Policy and guidance documents from these organizations can have a big impact on what eventually happens in the classroom. New policy documents should focus on: (1) disciplinary guidance, including learning objectives, concepts and disciplinary tools for the study of religion and sacred texts outside social studies; (2) accreditation and licensing, including the standards for licensing and accreditation in teacher education programs (related to both subject matter requirements and diversity and equity requirements); and (3) assessment, including reviews of existing assessments (e.g. International Baccalaureate (IB) world religion, advanced placement (AP) U.S. history, AP world history) with recommendations for improvements.

PRIORITY TASKS

- Create a set of learning objectives for the academic study of sacred texts, modeled on the Religious Studies Companion Document to the C3 Framework (2017). Given the proliferation of Bible-as-literature courses, it's imperative to have clear learning objectives agreed upon by SBL and the mainstream education community, including NCTE.
- Revise the National Standards for the Preparation of Social Studies Teachers (2018), approved by NCSS and the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) Specialized Professional Association Standards Review Committee, to include religious studies.
- Survey accreditation and license requirements related to religious studies education, diversity education, and/or cultural competence to determine whether religion is adequately represented. Accrediting bodies include CAEP, Association for Advancing Quality in Educator Preparation (AAQEP) and American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE).

5. Expand and strengthen pre-service teacher education to increase attention to religious diversity and add religious studies courses/curricula for teachers in all content areas.

Pre-service educators are entering the classroom entirely unprepared to teach about religion in academically rigorous and constitutionally appropriate ways despite being required to do so by state and national standards. The lack of training results in many educators either teaching these standards sub-optimally or skipping them altogether. Additionally, educators lack awareness of religious liberty guidelines for public schools (see Haynes and Thomas, 2011). Degree and certificate programs include very little if any discussion of religious literacy and religious liberty issues for a variety of reasons, which will necessitate a varied approach to addressing this deficit. First, pre-service education curricula are already at capacity; many pre-service educators do not have the option or time to take religious studies or religious studies education courses. Therefore, we should work with institutions of higher learning to incorporate religious literacy and religious liberty education into pre-existing, required coursework.

Second, we should gauge interest among these institutions and their students for stand-alone courses dedicated to religious studies education. Many of the signatories to this document argue that the scope and importance of this work is too great and the impact on untrained educators and students too high to rely solely on supplemental or cursory approaches to these issues at the pre-service level. For either of these approaches to be successful, we will also have to increase awareness of religious studies education among relevant higher education stakeholders (see the outreach discussion above).

PRIORITY TASKS

- Compile information about the existing religious studies education coursework and its impact on pre-service educators.
- Survey the knowledge and comfort of religious studies education and laws related to religion and education among higher education educators of pre-service teachers.
- Disseminate new AAR guidelines for college students targeted at schools of education.

6. Expand and strengthen in-service teacher education about religious studies.

Fortunately, in-service educator training about religious studies has seen substantive growth in recent years. As districts and states have been required to teach about religion through the adoption of new standards and curricula, stakeholders have recognized the current gap in teacher knowledge and practices and have sought non-partisan, non-sectarian support from organizations in the field. Yet, more can be done to continue and strengthen this work in public schools.

In order to expand the reach of religious studies education, we should first identify existing in-service teacher training programs outlining their goals, audiences and impacts. With a full account of what is currently available, we will be better prepared to increase and leverage district and state-level support for these programs. Local support can also be critical to solving logistical issues around religious studies education training such as funding or appropriate accreditation to earn professional development or related credits. As John Camardella in Illinois, Chris Murray in Maryland or the Religious Freedom Center's Rights, Responsibility, Respect Project in Georgia have shown, district and state-level buy-in amongst community stakeholders can open doors and increase the reach of such programs.

Whether through existing or new programs, the extremely varied nature of schools and districts necessitates that no single approach will be effective in all communities. Therefore, we should also work with professional associations such as NCSS, NCTE, AASA, etc., that reach wider audiences to supplement, improve and create professional development opportunities on religious studies education.

PRIORITY TASKS

- Catalogue and market all currently available religious studies education professional development opportunities to increase teacher and district awareness.
- Engage educational support agencies to create religious studies education initiatives that make use of existing in-service teacher training networks.

7. Organize a resource clearinghouse to collect existing and future high-quality curriculum and professional support/development opportunities.

As previously noted, there are many organizations currently involved in creating resources related to religion and education. However, educators and researchers seeking these resources are limited to what they are currently aware of or can find with specific search terms. Additionally, the sensitive nature of religion makes educators wary of online materials due to concerns about bias or inaccurate information. Educators with little or no religious studies education are likely to avoid teaching about religion if they cannot easily find trusted, high-quality resources and training.

The creation of a resource clearinghouse supported by multiple organizations would allow educators and others to quickly find a wide range of materials. Asking participating organizations to agree to adhere to guidelines related to the academic study of religion in their submitted resources would lend confidence to the materials. Such a clearinghouse would enable smaller organizations to make their materials more easily available and increase their visibility. Further, by gathering a broad set of materials in one place, users will become more aware of the scope of the field.

PRIORITY TASKS

- Build a web platform to host the clearinghouse. A site is already being built for two related networks (Religion & Education Collaborative and the Religion & Education Consortium) that could serve this function and be a logical home for the resource library.
- Gather buy-in from related organizations to provide both resources and funding to support the platform and its management. Participating organizations should agree to adhere to general guidelines regarding materials produced for the academic study of religion (e.g. following First Amendment guidelines, non-sectarian approach, etc.).
- Raise awareness of the site among educators and other relevant stakeholders.

8. Engage face-to-face and online communities to nurture broad support for religious studies education within and beyond the traditional school day.

Religious studies educators have faced questions by students, administrators, parents, elected officials and religious community members who are concerned about the content of the curriculum and the rights of students. Community controversies can undermine political will to support religious studies education.

Religious studies education can flourish when schools engage communities. Working with community stakeholders can improve confidence in the rigor of religious studies education, create a coalition of stakeholders willing to stand up for religious studies educators should challenges arise and nurture community-wide demand for K-12 religious studies courses. That said, schools should not cede full control of the curriculum to communities and they must remember their duty to teach about religion in an academic way by analyzing the role of religion in the full range of human expression. Teachers may not favor one religion over another, religion over non-religion, or vice versa.

PRIORITY TASKS

- Identify models for engaging community members in diverse contexts. Models should illustrate how programs and curricula can be culturally responsive. For example, John Camardella has created one model for engaging the parents of students enrolled in religious studies courses at a relatively well-resourced suburban high school. A case study should be written about this program and opportunities for adapting Camardella's parent education program in different contexts. The Islamic Networks Group offers another model of community engagement that is worthy of study.
- Private (religious and non-religious) school networks (e.g. National Catholic Educational Association and Council of Islamic Schools in North America), public school districts and professional societies (e.g. NCSS, NCTE) can pool resources to create professional development opportunities for educators committed to religious studies education. Collaboration has the potential to reduce misconceptions about religion in private and public education.
- A multi-stakeholder group of scholars, educators, administrators and religious community members should draft a consensus document about the proper role of religious communities in religious studies education. Guidelines should be provided with regard to site visits to houses of worship, guest lectures by religious community members, feedback processes for religious communities that wish to comment on curricula and the role of religious communities in teacher professional development programs.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AACTE: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education

AAQEP: Association for Advancing Quality in Educator Preparation

AAR: American Academy of Religion

AASA: The Superintendents Association

AP: Advanced Placement

C3: College, Career, and Civic Life Framework for Social Studies State Standards

CAEP: Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation

CISNA: Council of Islamic Schools in North America

IB: International Baccalaureate

NCEA: National Catholic Educational Association

NCSS: National Council for the Social Studies

NCTE: National Council of Teachers of English

OSCE: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

REDCo: Religion in Education: A contribution to Dialogue or a factor of Conflict in transforming societies of European Countries

RFC: Religious Freedom Center

SBL: Society of Biblical Literature

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT LIST

Scott Abbott

President, Middle States Council for the Social Studies

Sufia Azmat

Executive Director, Council of Islamic Schools in North America (CISNA)

Bea Bailey

Professor, Social Studies Education, Clemson University

Shereen Bhalla

Director, Education, Hindu American Foundation

Kevin J. Burke

Associate Professor, Dept. of Language and Literacy Education, University of Georgia

David Callaway

Project Manager, Georgia 3Rs Project, Religious Freedom Center

John Camardella

Teacher, World Religion, Prospect High School (Illinois)

Mark A. Chancey

Professor, Religious Studies, Southern Methodist University

Andrea D. Chavez-Kopp

Director, Formation and Digital Engagement, National Catholic Educational Association

Maureen Costello

Director, Teaching Tolerance, Southern Poverty Law Center

Maha Elgenaidi

Founder and Executive Director, Islamic Networks Group

Jessie Floura

Secretary, Kaur Foundation

Rosanna Fukuda

President-elect, Council of State Social Studies Specialists (CS4)

Bernadine Futrell

Director, Leadership Services, AASA (The School Superintendents Association)

Bruce Grelle

Director, Religion and Public Education Project, California State University, Chico

Roby Harrington

Vice Chairman, W. W. Norton and Company

Charles C. Haynes

Founder, Religious Freedom Center, Freedom Forum Institute

Tina L. Heafner

Professor, Dept. of Middle, Secondary and K-12 Education, University of North Carolina, Charlotte

Alice Hunt

Executive Director, American Academy of Religion

Mary M. Juzwik

Professor, Depts. of Teacher Education (TE) and English, Michigan State University

Rob Kunzman

Professor, Curriculum Studies and Philosophy of Education, Indiana University

John F. Kutsko

Executive Director, Society of Biblical Literature

Emile Lester

Professor, Dept. of Political Science and International Affairs, University of Mary Washington

Sarabinh Levy-Brightman

Senior Curriculum, Resource and Training Associate, Religious Literacy Project at Harvard

Benjamin P. Marcus

Religious Literacy Specialist, Religious Freedom Center, Freedom Forum Institute

Bob Mattingly

Executive Director, The Center for Spiritual and Ethical Education

Chris Murray

National Board-Certified Teacher, Stone Ridge School of the Sacred Heart (Maryland)

Jéri L. Ogden

Senior Fellow of Educator Engagement, ASCD

Kelly O'Riley

Teacher, World History, Fern Creek High School (Kentucky)

Erik Owens

Director, International Studies Program, Boston College

Lawrence Paska

Executive Director, National Council for the Social Studies

Marion Pierre

Public Programs Specialist, American Academy of Religion

Stephen Prothero

Professor, Dept. of Religion, Boston University

Mark Reading-Smith

Senior Managing Director, Programs, Sikh Coalition

Lexi Salomone

Assistant Director, Pluralism Project, Harvard University

Dennis Shirley

Professor, Education, Lynch School of Education and Human Development at Boston College

Kate E. Soules

Curriculum Specialist, Religious Freedom Center, Freedom Forum Institute

Michael D. Waggoner

Professor, Education, University of Northern Iowa

Maria Zubizarreta

World Religions Assessment Subject Manager, International Baccalaureate

APPENDIX B: SIGNATORIES TO THE WHITE PAPER

Scott Abbott

President, Middle States Council for the Social Studies

Sufia Azmat

Executive Director, Council of Islamic Schools in North America (CISNA)

Bea Bailey

Professor, Social Studies Education, Clemson University

Shereen Bhalla

Director, Education, Hindu American Foundation

Kevin J. Burke

Associate Professor, Dept. of Language and Literacy Education, University of Georgia

David Callaway

Project Manager, Georgia 3Rs Project, Religious Freedom Center

John Camardella

Teacher, World Religion, Prospect High School (Illinois)

Mark A. Chancey

Professor, Religious Studies, Southern Methodist University

Andrea D. Chavez-Kopp

Director, Formation and Digital Engagement, National Catholic Educational Association

Maureen Costello

Director, Teaching Tolerance, Southern Poverty Law Center

Maha Elgenaidi

Founder and Executive Director, Islamic Networks Group

Jessie Floura

Secretary, Kaur Foundation

Bruce Grelle

Director, Religion and Public Education Project, California State University, Chico

Charles C. Haynes

Founder, Religious Freedom Center, Freedom Forum Institute

Alice Hunt

Executive Director, American Academy of Religion

Mary M. Juzwik

Professor, Depts. of Teacher Education (TE) and English, Michigan State University

Rob Kunzman

Professor, Curriculum Studies and Philosophy of Ed., Indiana University

John F. Kutsko

Executive Director, Society of Biblical Literature

Emile Lester

Professor, Dept. of Political Science and International Affairs, University of Mary Washington

Benjamin P. Marcus

Religious Literacy Specialist, Religious Freedom Center, Freedom Forum Institute

Bob Mattingly

Executive Director, The Center for Spiritual and Ethical Education

Chris Murray

National Board-Certified Teacher, Stone Ridge School of the Sacred Heart (Maryland)

National Council for the Social Studies**Kelly O'Riley**

Teacher, World History, Fern Creek High School (Kentucky)

Erik Owens

Director, International Studies Program, Boston College

Marion Pierre

Public Programs Specialist, American Academy of Religion

Stephen Prothero

Professor, Dept. of Religion, Boston University

Lexi Salomone

Assistant Director, Pluralism Project, Harvard University

Dennis Shirley

Professor, Education, Lynch School of Education and Human Development at Boston College

Sikh Coalition**Kate E. Soules**

Curriculum Specialist, Religious Freedom Center, Freedom Forum Institute

Michael D. Waggoner

Professor, Education, University of Northern Iowa

Maria Zubizarreta

World Religions Assessment Subject Manager, International Baccalaureate

