

FAMILY ISSUES FACT SHEET

No. 2025-01 (January 2026)

HB 2266: SCHOOL ATTENDANCE REQUIREMENTS; RELIGIOUS PURPOSES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Arizona students have “the right to be excused from school attendance for religious purposes.”¹ Accordingly, the law states that students may attend religious classes (called release time programs) during the school day under ARS 15-806. Unfortunately, the wording of the law—using “may” instead of “shall”—allows school boards to prevent parent-supported programs from operating in their school district. This restricts a parent’s ability to direct their child’s religious and educational upbringing.

H.B. 1001 sets the record straight: School boards **shall** allow release time programs that teach students positive moral values. It also requires release time programs to operate in a safe and constitutional manner. The Supreme Court has declared release time programs constitutional, studies have found them academically beneficial, and parents consider them a valuable tool in their child’s upbringing. It is time for school boards to make way for parental choice.

BACKGROUND

Release time programs have existed for well over a decade, primarily instructing Mormon, Christian, and Jewish students.² The groundbreaking U.S. Supreme Court case *Zorach v. Clauson* (1952) confirmed the constitutionality of these programs, provided they take place off school property, receive no government funding, and obtain parental permission.³ Many Christian organizations—including Children’s Bible Ministries, School Ministries, and LifeWise Academy—have started Biblically based moral instruction classes. In Arizona, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints also offers release time programs.⁴ Parents and educators overwhelmingly approve of release time programs and believe they benefit students.⁵

However, some school boards use the wording of the law to block release time programs from operating in their states. One school board in Ohio, for example, used the “may” language to rescind LifeWise Academy’s permission to operate, despite significant student participation.⁶ Their decision highlights the danger of the current law: At any point, school boards can abridge a parent’s right to direct the religious upbringing and education of their child. HB 2266 prevents Arizona school boards from engaging in the same overreach.

WHAT THE BILL DOES

- 1. Changes the language of the law from “may” to “shall.”**
The updated statute reads: “The policy shall [emphasis added] permit a pupil to be excused from school attendance for religious purposes, including participation in religious exercises or religious instruction.”
- 2. Ensures students receive at least one hour a week for release time programs** without being considered absent from school. Students assume responsibility for any missed schoolwork.
- 3. Requires that release time programs operate constitutionally and safely** by meeting specified criteria to obtain school board approval. Requirements include prohibitions on government funding and use of school personnel, acceptance of liability for student injury, maintenance of attendance records, and conducting background checks on all program volunteers.

TALKING POINTS

- 1. Gives Parents Control in Directing Their Child’s Education.**
This legislation ensures parents have the freedom to choose what, if any, religious education their children receive during the school day.
- 2. Increases Attendance & Academic Performance.**
Students who attend religious release time programs are 7% more likely to attend their other classes and, in many cases, outperform their peers on assessments and exams.
- 3. Teaches Good Behavior—Produces Real Results.**
Students in release time programs learn positive moral values. This has led to significant reductions in suspensions. Teachers can spend more time teaching when they spend less time addressing behavioral issues.

CONCLUSION

Release time programs give parents the ability to direct the educational and religious upbringing of their children. School boards should not be permitted to interfere with this parental right. HB2266 changes statutory language to protect parental rights while establishing common-sense requirements to ensure the safety and constitutionality of release time programs. These programs increase school attendance, boost academic performance, and reduce behavioral problems. Schools gain students who are more eager to participate and learn. Parents regain their rights. HB2266 is an all-around win for schools, parents, and students.