



NEW HANOVER COUNTY SCHOOLS

Christopher R. Barnes, EdD.
Superintendent

To: NHCS School Board Members

From: Christopher R. Barnes, Superintendent, NHCS

Date: April 28, 2026

Subject: Information Regarding LifeWise Academy

The board has asked me to provide them with an overview of the LifeWise program prior to voting on the consideration of creating an MOU for approval. To complete this task, I have done the following:

- Reviewed information and research provided by the LifeWise program. This included two separate meetings with representatives from LifeWise to discuss questions and gain a better understanding of the program.
- Spoke with numerous superintendents around the state who have created or are in the process of creating an agreement with the organization.
- Completed my own research regarding the program from other organizations.
- Sat down with school principals to discuss the logistics of the program and to understand potential concerns from their perspective.
- Reviewed emails and survey results from the community regarding the program and their endorsement or concerns.

LifeWise Academy provides Released Time Religious Instruction for students. It has primarily been launched in elementary and middle schools. Based on the legal interpretation, this is permissible so long as three tenets are followed. It cannot take place during core instruction. It cannot take place on school grounds, and it cannot utilize school finances or tangible resources.

I would like to provide you with a list of both positive and negative factors to consider as you make your decision.

Advantages:

- **Character Development:** Supporters state that the curriculum builds positive character traits like empathy, compassion, and discipline through "Bible-based" lessons.
- **Improved Student Outcomes:** A study commissioned by LifeWise reported increases in attendance and decreases in suspensions for participating students. The report is linked at the end of this memo.
- **Mental Health Support:** Religious instruction can offer a "lifeline" for students, leading to improved mental health and better peer influences.
- **Parental Rights:** It allows parents to choose religious education for their children during the school day without impacting on afterschool activities.

Disadvantages:

- **Instructional Disruption:** If implemented incorrectly, students could miss valuable classroom time for subjects like art, music, or library. Normal occurrences and delays can happen which means that students will disrupt the normal school day in the transition before or after the program.
- **Instructional Time:** It can be argued that every minute of the school day is considered instructional time, and that there isn't really "open time" in our day-to-day schedule.
- **Disputed Data:** Independent analyses, such as those from Respect Public Schools, have found no statistical evidence that LifeWise improves student outcomes. This report is linked at the end of this memo.
- **Staffing & Safety Standards:** It would be non-negotiable that the MOU would have to ensure that the same background checks and hiring standards are followed for any organization who has opportunity to interact with children without supervision. This would be the same as what is expected of our other community partners.
- **Curriculum Transparency:** There are concerns regarding a lack of transparency in the curriculum, which critics describe as literalist and potentially exclusionary toward some members of the school community.

I have spoken with the principals regarding this program. I have made it clear that any concerns they raise must be focused on logistics or academics. Their concerns mainly circle around the potential for lost instruction and the requirement to complete all facets of the required state curriculum. Please remember that we are also required to provide instruction for counseling, art, and music. We also have a required amount of exercise and activity each week as well. They have also expressed concerns regarding the amount of work that staff will have to put into the release and return of the children. While this will not translate to a monetary expense, this time will take them away from other duties and responsibilities.

Speaking as Superintendent, the MOU would have to meet all the requirements for our level two volunteers and would also need to indemnify the school system and the employees of all legal obligations of students during this time. This includes transportation, supervision, injury and student behavior. I also want to remind the board that, legally, this door is either open or closed. This may create additional agreements with other religions or interest groups.

Thank you for your interest in this matter.

We do that too (support)
Recess minutes for PE

Resources:

There are numerous articles, news reports and social media posts regarding this program. I have compiled a short list for your review.

[LifeWise Commission Report](#)
[Respect Public Schools Analysis](#)
[LifeWise Academy Website](#)
[Secular Education Association Report](#)