EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Public schools and communities working together strengthens schools and students, through Released Time Religious Education (RTRE) which:

- Is proven, constitutional, and provides for diversity of beliefs.
- Is a voluntary academic and devotional study of one’s faith during the school day, off school grounds, and with parental permission.
- Promotes equity for all students.
- Reduces enrollment losses (attrition) of students whose parents want them to have a public school education enhanced by instruction in religion and morality.

As you will see in this document, School Ministries offers schools an opportunity to help students overcome COVID-19 losses by offering Released Time Religious Education (RTRE). RTRE can help with a number of factors schools are facing, including:

- Lost instructional time
- Behavioral issues
- Social and emotional mental health issues

The strategic investment of as little as 3% of a student’s weekly instructional time can pay huge dividends in a child’s academic performance, positive behaviors, and improvements in mental health.

CONCLUSION: Released Time Religious Education can be a critical part of the recovery plan for public schools to help students overcome COVID-19 deficits.

School Ministries, founded in 1991, is the largest Christian Released Time organization in the nation.
Released Time is proven.
Since an innovative public school superintendent first saw the need for this cooperative effort in 1914, America’s schools and faith communities have served in concert to supplement students’ public education with matters of morality and meaning.¹ Having served millions of students throughout the years, Released Time Religious Education has grown to reach over 350,000 students in grades K-12 nationwide as of early 2020, School Ministries’ National Executive Director, Ken Breivik, estimates.

Released Time is constitutional and promotes diversity of beliefs.
Released Time, which is open to any religion, honors the 1st Amendment and the judicial doctrine of the separation of church and state by providing for diversity of beliefs and protecting students’ and parents’ rights to the free exercise of religion. Settled Released Time law allows schools to accommodate parents’ desires to enroll their children in Released Time, while affording schools protection from charges of state-established religion. In 1952, the U.S. Supreme Court declared Released Time constitutional in Zorach v. Clauson as long as it is voluntary, provided at no cost to the schools or taxpayers, held off school grounds, and dependent upon parental permission.² Therefore, Released Time is the voluntary academic and devotional study of one’s faith during the school day, off school grounds, with parental permission.

Released Time provides equity for all students.
Unlike afterschool or before-school programs, Released Time programs allow for free and equitable access to all students because transportation issues and extracurricular activities do not restrict or compete. This makes religious instruction available regardless of the student and family’s economic situation.

Released Time reduces public school enrollment losses (attrition) of students whose parents want religious instruction.
This constitutional cooperative arrangement between community members and schools offers students significant advantages most students could receive in no other way, short of attending private religious schools, homeschooling, or online schooling. Released Time reduces attrition because it allows students to remain in public schools without having to give up the opportunity and benefits of religious instruction.

There’s no quick fix to all the damage COVID-19 has done to our public school students. Schools are hard pressed to do even more than ever before. Concerned teachers, administrators, parents and families, and people in the community of faith are committed to helping every student find a way forward.

Our mutual mission is to help students overcome COVID-19 losses by helping restore them to academic success and health of mind, body, and spirit.

By law, public schools cannot help students spiritually. However, School Ministries and Released Time Religious Education (also called “Released Time”) can, and its proven benefits include academic improvement, better behavior, character development, and diversity of thought and belief.
Released Time Religious Education accelerates learning, despite students being released during part of the school day.

As pressure has risen for administrators to help students make up for lost time and improve scores, it is paramount to note that Released Time is beneficial to improving academic performance.

Public educators are understandably alarmed at the challenge of too much missed school. That’s where Released Time can help.

Released Time classes enhance students’ academic performance.

A growing body of quantitative and qualitative evidence documents the positive effects of Released Time participation. A study of 350 students randomly selected from a student body of 2,434 suburban students grades 10-12, identified Released Time participation as one of top three factors (along with the number of core and non-core courses taken) likely to positively influence academics:

“After examining the possible effect of enrollment in Released-Time Religious Education (RTRE) courses on the academic achievement of students, we found that RTRE students’ mean grade point averages were significantly higher than those of non-RTRE students.”

The *Journal of the National Association of Social Workers* also reports benefits of Released Time on students’ scholastic pursuits; “[T]he more often students attended [Released Time] class, the better their academic outcomes. ...Release[d] Time may help instill values that enable students to achieve academically.”

Released Time reinforces academic skills. Students are engaged in reading, discussion, memorization, and critical thinking while at Released Time.

Moreover, students from disadvantaged communities who engage in religious practices have been shown to develop higher educational aspirations.

Released Time classes can help shrink the achievement gap.

Many schools did not or could not reopen in the Fall of 2020 – or experienced significant interruption. A survey of 200 educators published January 2021 predicted that the achievement gap, which has grown since 2020, will continue to widen until students are fully back in school.

In June 2020, the *New York Times* warned: “New research suggests that by September [2020], most students will have fallen behind... with some losing the equivalent of a full school years’ worth of academic gains. Racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps will most likely widen because of disparities in access to computers, home internet connections and direct instruction from teachers. And the crisis is far from over.”

But the news is not all bleak. Research across a multiplicity of disciplines has shown that the achievement gap can be greatly affected by two key factors. And one of them, indisputably, is religion. According to Dr. William Jeynes, experienced education researcher, “The results of the meta-analysis provided a lot of insight... For example, religious faith (specifically Christianity), proved to have the highest impact for reducing the achievement gap. Essentially, if a youth was religious, the achievement gap was cut in half. Family structure earned a second-place ranking.”

Released Time classes do not interfere with a child’s mandatory school courses or connection-building afterschool activities.

The class schedule is set by school personnel in consultation with Released Time staff. Typically, Released Time classes are scheduled for times when other specials or electives are offered, often once weekly or at other intervals as agreed by schools and the community of faith offering Released Time. Since 2006, the number of states offering elective high school credit for Released Time has grown from one to seven states. While a statute is not necessary for schools and communities to cooperate to provide Released Time, more than half of all states have a law either requiring or allowing Released Time if requested by the community.

Released Time Religious Education can help educators reduce the amount of time spent on behavioral issues.

Released Time fosters better classroom discipline. As Released Time students return to class, they bring back to their public school classrooms positive behaviors, including increased respect for teachers, improved attitudes, and self-control. In addition, releasing elementary students allows for reduced class sizes and extra time for intervention for those who do not attend Released Time.

**Dr. Carolin McKie**

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I have had several teachers tell me of students that used to misbehave in class all the time, not completing class assignments or homework and challenging the teachers at every turn. But now those same students have now become star students since joining CRTE. I have seen children who had low self-esteem due to living in unhealthy environments learn to believe in themselves by exhibiting confidence - because they learned in CRTE that they are important, that they are loved by God, and He created them to be the best that they can be.
Released Time Religious Education programs are especially equipped to meet the mental and social health needs that COVID-19 has amplified.

Stanford psychologists who studied adolescents reported in September 2020, “School closures and enforced social distancing have cut off many teens from major means of psychological support, putting them at higher risk of developing anxiety and depression... The researchers found that teenagers who showed greater connectivity, or interconnectedness, in a set of particular brain regions were less likely to experience pandemic-related depression and anxiety...”¹¹

Released Time provides supportive and protective factors for students.

Released Time meets students where they are: hurting, longing for connection, and fighting off despair. Reports are accumulating, documenting how the loss of social connections has affected students. Health Central reports recent survey results found that 80% of students have experienced some negative impact to their mental health due to the pandemic, and 20% say their mental health has significantly worsened.¹²

“Mental health and academic achievement are linked, research shows. Chronic stress changes the chemical and physical structure of the brain, impairing cognitive skills like attention, concentration, memory, and creativity,” Edutopia, an educational foundation, reports. Their article titled “COVID-19’s Impact on Students’ Academic and Mental Well-Being” suggests prioritizing strategies that center on relationship-building to help students.¹³

Released Time education surrounds students with parents, church volunteers and dedicated Released Time teachers – just the type of multigenerational, caring community...
released by CDC experts seeking to address risks posed to students by COVID-19 and today's culture: “There are concrete steps schools, families, and healthcare providers can take to promote connectedness among youth. Schools can: ...facilitate positive youth development activities. Implementing mentoring programs, providing opportunities to volunteer in the community, or connecting students to community-based programs can provide youth with a network of supportive adults.” Additionally, the CDC reports, “Research shows that students with someone at school who cares about them have better academic performance, health, and behavioral outcomes.”

**Released Time provides a critical and positive mitigating factor for mental health issues—regular religious attendance.**

Released Time classes provide a vital faith component to children's education that lifts the psychosocial burdens imposed by COVID-19. According to a 2020 Gallup Poll report, “Remarkably, faithful churchgoers were the only people who reported improvement in mental health since last year. For those who reported weekly attendance at religious services, 46 percent reported their mental health as 'excellent,' up four points from 42 percent in 2019.”

For many students, Released Time is church. Margaret, a 6th grader, said, “I came to Released Time because my mom couldn’t come to church because of work.” Jostlyn, also a 6th grader, reports, “I learned to always treat others the way you want to be treated...I liked all the teachers 'cause they helped you through your troubles.”

**CONCLUSION: Released Time can be a critical part of the recovery plan for schools to help students overcome COVID-19 deficits.**

Public schools and Released Time programs working together will give students the greatest opportunity to catch up academically and to stabilize their lives, which have been negatively impacted by COVID-19.

The strategic investment of as little as 3% of a student's weekly instructional time can pay huge dividends in a child's academic performance, positive behaviors, and improvements in mental health.

**Released Time is needed more now than ever before.**
For additional information on Released Time and its legality, as well as supporting material for this document, please visit www.releasedtime.org/legality and www.releasedtime.org/covidrecovery

School Ministries, begun in 1991, is the largest Christian Released Time organization in the nation.

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ENDNOTES