



CHILDLIKE FAITH: A volunteer in South Carolina helps a student establish a firm foundation for life.

Schoolhouse Rock

Thanks to a 2001 U.S. Supreme Court ruling, evangelistic Good News Clubs are growing fast—inside America's public schools.

by Rod Thomson

One of the best-kept secrets in the nation is that America's public schools are seeing an explosion of Christian evangelism. As counterintuitive as it sounds, children are coming to salvation through Christ by the tens of thousands inside the country's public schools.

Good News Clubs have been multiplying in public schools since a landmark—but little-known—U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 2001 that says the clubs must have

the same after-school access as any other program.

The mainstay ministry of Child Evangelism Fellowship (CEF), a 75-year-old organization based in Warrenton, Mo., the clubs are aimed at evangelizing and teaching kids in elementary schools. Since that ruling, CEF has rushed through the opened legal door, seizing an opportunity that is seldom available for Christian groups in the public square.

"We have more freedom now in the public schools than we did in

the '40s and '50s," said CEF President Reese Kaufmann. "We have a door open now, but we don't know for how long."

Indeed, at the most local level of the organization, this is apparent.

Robert Burkley, director of the CEF chapter in northern San Diego, Calif.—not exactly the Bible Belt—started working with the organization in 2000. "Back then, it was very difficult to get into the schools. It was quite hostile, really," he said. "We basically have an open door now. We've gotten into all the major school districts."

That is counter to the impression most Christians have gotten about public schools over the last 50 years: In the 1960s, the U.S. Supreme Court banished prayer from public schools, and subsequent rulings clamped down even further on expressions of faith inside their walls—consider, for instance, the purging of the Christmas story from schools and other government locations.

That's why so many church leaders are surprised by what's going on now. "An awful lot of pastors don't know it's even legal," Kaufmann said.

Burkley sees it almost daily as he struggles to find volunteers to fill the huge demand. "You'd be surprised how many people are completely unaware this is happening," he said.

But it is happening. In fact, it's bursting.

How Do They Do That?

There are about 4,000 Good News Clubs in public schools in the United States, according to CEF. Last year, volunteers presented the Gospel to more than 145,000 children through face-to-face conversations, and more than 27,000 of those children gave professions of faith in Christ. This is more than just getting kids to recite a prayer and reporting numbers: CEF is se-

rious about children knowing exactly what they are doing and why.

“It’s very easy to manipulate children. We’re looking for souls to be saved,” Kaufmann said. “We want to make a clear presentation of the Gospel. Not water it down or make it politically correct. ... The rest of it is God’s work.”

CEF, it should be remembered, is a global ministry. In fact, of its 2,800 worldwide employees, only about 700 are in the United States. Full-time employees are greatly leveraged by the huge network of volunteers—but there still aren’t enough to meet the demands in the schools.

The clubs invite children to attend after school and, like other groups, require signed permission slips from parents. Volunteers from local churches who’ve received training and materials from CEF run the weekly clubs; A typical one can have up to 10 volunteers.

Children are taught about morals and character, and even receive extra schooling. But the most important element for most volunteers is what Kaufmann calls “the clear presentation of the Gospel.” And CEF isn’t shy about that at all.

“Children have been neglected, overlooked by the church and most people,” Kaufmann said, adding pointedly: “We spend time babysitting, telling stories, and we’re not too concerned with evangelizing them.”

Grassroots Leaders

Without the involvement of local churches and their members, the clubs just don’t happen.

One of the most successful districts is in the four-county area of Greenville, S.C. Out of 106 elementary schools there, Good News Clubs are active in 100, with 1,125 volunteers showing up every week. In the other six schools, principals chose not to have any after-school activities.

B.J. Bateman, district director for the Greenville/Piedmont area, does not understand that thinking. But since she’s met harsh resistance from a few principals, she said she suspects it may be a strategy to keep the clubs out without being accused of discrimination. Regardless of the reason, Bateman said she finds such a stance to be anti-education.

“We’re providing free tutorials for children, like what the South



QUIET TIMES: South Carolina students take time out for group prayer.

Carolina Department of Education is doing,” she says. “And the church will step in and help with the physical needs of children.”

Despite those few holdouts, the district is a huge success. In 2011, 10,531 children were enrolled who were getting help with schoolwork, taking part in character-building activities and hearing the Gospel. Of those, 1,228 made professions of faith last year.

Bateman said the biggest challenge is getting 20- and 30-somethings interested in helping out. That age group is trending toward the mega-churches, which often tend to be less evangelistic and more issue-oriented. “We want to

keep all the generations involved,” she said.

Golden Opportunity

Most Good News Clubs’ efforts are centered on neighborhoods and some “release-time” programs—those in a handful of states where children are allowed to leave the school campus during instructional hours for club activities at a nearby church or home. Before 2001, only a very small percentage of clubs met in public schools.

That started to change in 1997, when a pastor in Milford, N.Y., asked for permission to run a club in the local school, but was told he couldn’t under the U.S. Constitution’s establishment clause. He challenged that interpretation, and the case eventually landed at the U.S. Supreme Court, where justices overturned the school and the Court of Appeals. (See “A Door Opens,” page 23.)

It was an opportunity that CEF wasn’t going to miss.

In 2001, there were fewer than 16,000 students in the release-time clubs and fewer than 17,000 in the after-school clubs nationwide. Since the *Milford* case was decided, school enrollment has increased by nearly 1,000 percent, while professions of faith are up nearly 8,000 percent. There’s simply no denying that the in-school clubs reach more non-Christian children.

The clubs are found everywhere—from inner-city schools in Chicago to rural Southern schools, hip California schools and even remote village schools in Alaska. And their impacts are far-reaching over generations.

“Whole families come to the Lord because of the changed life of a child,” Kaufmann said. “You can’t hide a true salvation. It’s going to come out.”

But sometimes the fruit shows up only by looking backwards. “It takes a long time for chil-

A Door Opens

In many ways, the 2001 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that opened up the public schools for Good News Clubs was a turning of the tide in the century-long secularization of the nation's school system, which peaked with the removal of prayer in the 1960s.

But the 6-3 ruling itself was a bit of a surprise. There was plenty of jurisprudence pointing toward upholding the Court of Appeals ruling saying the clubs were proselytizing and so could not be allowed on government-run school grounds. The position of the district in Milford, N.Y., denying the clubs access to school grounds, upheld by the Court of Appeals, was that the clubs were essentially trying to convert children to Christianity, and that violated the establishment clause of the U.S. Constitution.

But the clubs said they were teaching how to live upright lives and using the Bible as their source. They also taught about Christianity in the same way the Boy Scouts teach about the tenets of good citizenship.

Justice Clarence Thomas, who wrote the opinion for the majority, and Justice Antonin Scalia, who wrote a concurring opinion, said the Good News Clubs are the same as any other group using the schools to teach morals and character, and should not be penalized because they use Christianity to do so. They dismissed the charge involving the establishment clause and honed in the issue of free speech.

"What matters for purposes of the Free Speech Clause is that we can see no logical difference in kind between the invocation of Christianity by the Club and the invocation of teamwork, loyalty, or patriotism by other associations to provide a foundation for their lessons," Thomas wrote. "According to the Court of Appeals, reliance on Christian principles taints moral and character instruction in a way that other foundations for thought or viewpoints do not."

Scalia phrased it with his trademark bluntness: "What is at play here is not coercion, but the compulsion of ideas—and the private right to exert and receive that compulsion (or to have one's children receive it) ... is protected by the Free Speech and Free Exercise Clauses, not banned by the Establishment Clause. A priest has as much liberty to proselytize as a patriot."

It's easy to see why Child Evangelism Fellowship officials are energetic in their efforts to take full advantage of this open door. While the vote was 6-3, Justice Stephen Breyer concurred only in part. It is not impossible to see how the replacement of justices such as Scalia, Thomas and Anthony Kennedy could mean a different ruling in the future. The Court may be averse to overturning precedents, but it most certainly will at times. Consider the 1857 Dred Scott case upholding slavery, which was 7-2.

—Rod Thomson

dren to grow up," said Moises Esteves, CEF's vice president of U.S. ministries.

That is demonstrated in the life of a famous Christian athlete.

Kim Innocenzi came to know Christ through a Good News Club in Chicago in the 1970s. As an adult, she explained the Gospel to her husband, who also accepted Christ. Her husband is Joe Girardi, manager of the New York Yankees. Girardi and his wife are known for their outward Christian faith, which can be particularly tough in a media market such as New York.

But the real numbers are found in grassroots America.

Michelle and A.J. Burris are children attending Lake Forest Elementary School in Greenville County, S.C. They began going to a Good News Club there and ended up making professions of faith. It was so sincere that their parents decided to attend Edwards Road Baptist Church, which sponsored the club. In the end, both parents and a grandmother accepted Christ—showing just how powerful a child's simple faith can be.

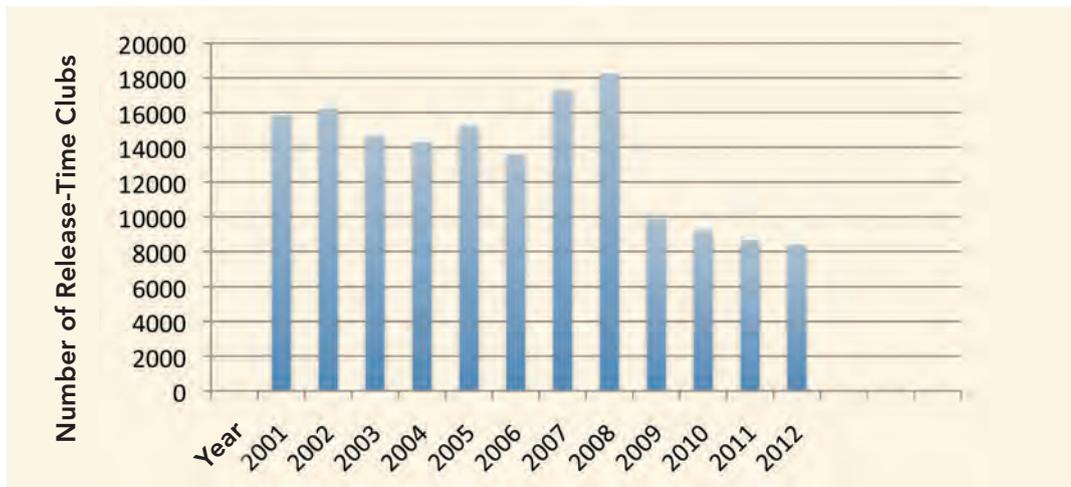
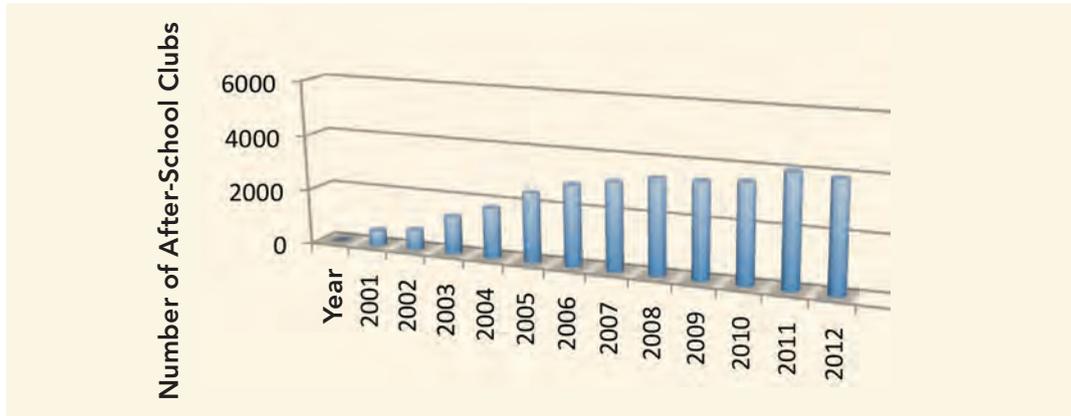
Recently, the Burris family lost

a baby 28 weeks into the pregnancy. The painful loss was softened by the peace of knowing Jesus. They named the baby Faith, knowing they would "see her again someday."

Ruth McWhite is a club volunteer at Mountain View Elementary School in Taylors, S.C. At a recent CEF dinner, she told the story of a third-grade girl who prayed with her about receiving Christ—the first child McWhite had ever led to the Lord, and a thrilling experience for her. But tragedy and joy quickly mingled: A few days later, she got

Good News Clubs Public School Growth Since 2001

Good News Clubs have been burgeoning since the U.S. Supreme Court said the public schools could not discriminate against them. (Note the decrease in the number of release-time clubs as the more effective after-school clubs grew in size.)



word that the child had been killed in a car accident.

“I wept with sorrow for her parents,” McWhite said, “but I also wept with joy for the incomparable privilege of being part of her life.”

The stories go on. They are particularly poignant when they come from public schools where the Good News Clubs are the only “church” many of the children have.

No Guarantees

While the Supreme Court victory cleared the way for this public school renaissance, it did not end

the legal battles.

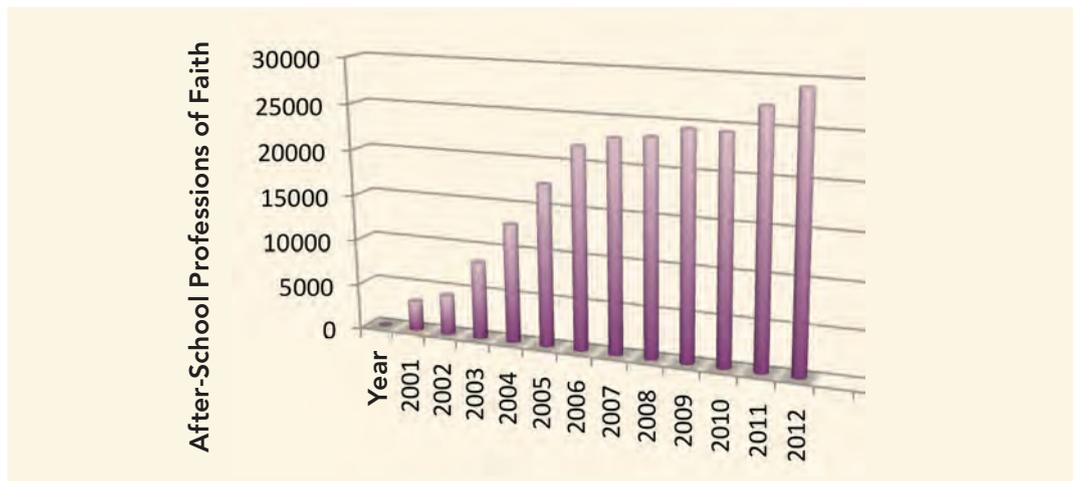
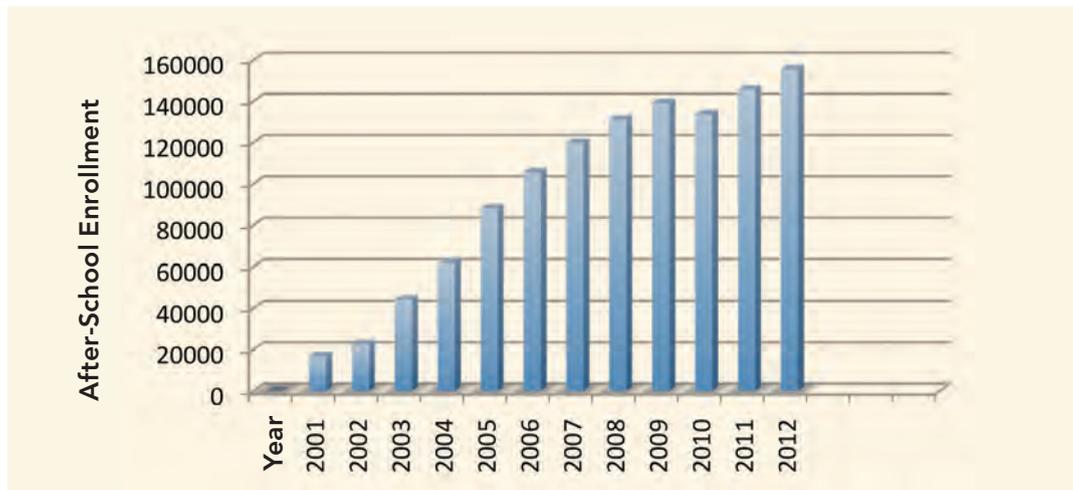
“There are constant challenges,” said Mat Staver, founder and chairman of the Liberty Counsel, which represents CEF nationwide on this issue. Usually, a letter citing the high court’s decision is enough to resolve the problem. But often, opposition becomes obstinate.

For instance, take the battles in Georgia. In 2009, the Cobb County Board of Education first claimed the clubs were unconstitutional, then tried to require them to pay for use of the schools when other clubs did not—then

banned them from the premises until after 5:45 p.m.

This caused attendance to plunge. After the local CEF chapter filed suit, citing *Milford*, the school district changed its policy. The area now has clubs in 15 schools with more than 1,000 students attending, and is adding clubs in new schools each year.

The Cobb County situation is typical of districts that try to block the clubs. They allow the clubs to use the school—but not to advertise like everyone else can. Or the schools will charge the clubs a fee that no one else



Source: Child Evangelism Fellowship
 Note: Release-time clubs are still used by CEF in the few states that allow children to leave campus during instructional hours.

pays, or not allow fliers to be sent to parents, or them meet at such an inconvenient time that no one shows up. Liberty Counsel has faced all of those examples, and overcome each with the bazooka that is *Milford*.

In fact, the legal organization won a case just a few months ago in the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, after new leaders took charge of a Minneapolis school district and banned the clubs. They would not relent, and Liberty Counsel had to take them to court.

“We’ve represented (CEF) for years and have not lost a single

case,” Staver said.

That’s what a clear Supreme Court precedent will do.

“Good News Clubs are the most positive thing to happen to public schools in decades,” Staver said. “They provide the opportunity for elementary students to learn character, morals and respect, and to learn about the Bible and salvation.”

And he makes an interesting observation: When the courts took prayer out of schools in the 1960s, those prayers were only about 60 seconds long and often vague. But Good News Clubs provide 60 to

90 minutes of the Gospel at a time, clearly.

“I am convinced of the strategic importance of them,” he said. “They are the unvarnished presentation of the Gospel and Bible truths.” ■

To learn more about Child Evangelism Fellowship’s ministries and how you can get involved, log onto http://www.cefonline.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=section&id=4&Itemid=100048.

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