

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P. O. BOX 750 · MADISON, WI 53701 · (608) 256-8900 · WWW.FFRF.ORG

May 5, 2011

SENT VIA MAIL AND FAX
(216) 475-1824

Ms. Linda Reid
Superintendent
Garfield Heights City School District
5640 Briarcliff Dr.
Garfield Heights OH 44125

Re: Take-Home Flier Policy

Dear Superintendent Reid:

I am writing on behalf of members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to urge you to consider making changes to the District's take-home flier policies. FFRF is a nonprofit organization that works to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

Since 2007, FFRF received complaints about District involvement in organizing an annual field trip to a church for Maple Leaf Intermediate School students. We understand that you made arrangements in 2010 to ensure that Maple Leaf staff were not involved with sponsoring the field trip. We were recently notified that the District is the subject of a lawsuit by members of the moms group who helped organize the field trip and other events.

It is unfortunate that the moms group has sought to use the school as a recruiting ground for its religious purposes. The prior support that the District provided seems to have created a sense of entitlement. That has put the District in the unfortunate position that it is currently in.

I encourage you to consider amending the District's policies so that only District-sponsored announcements are sent home with students. This avoids the difficult First Amendment issues that arise when the school becomes involved in distributing materials for other groups.

Parents around the country frequently contact FFRF with complaints about religious fliers being sent home with their school children—some as young as five years old. The practice of distributing religious fliers by public schools is objectionable on many different grounds. First, school-sponsored distributions of religious material carry the stamp of official endorsement. Certainly, small children are apt to confuse official school notices with religious propaganda. Second, even if the school

disassociates itself from the religious activity through a disclaimer, the distribution of literature for religious organizations and activities likely requires the time and resources of paid school personnel. Where this practice is common, the sorting of fliers by teachers or staff cuts into instruction time and often overwhelms parents who may believe private events are school-sponsored. Third, the District may be required to disseminate materials that promote abhorrent views. What would the District do if the Westboro Baptist Church or other hate groups sought to distribute fliers? Such groups are allowed to share their views in a number of places but the public schools should not be one of them; schools should not create a "forum" for these organizations.

Clearly, this sort of entanglement between religion and government is unseemly and inappropriate. Many enlightened school districts across the country have sought to avoid this entanglement by prohibiting third parties from using the take-home flier system altogether. In light of the problems that flier distribution has created in Garfield Schools, the best policy is to eliminate the distribution of all outside organization fliers.

We appreciate your consideration in this matter. Please let us know if the District makes any changes to its flier distribution policies.

Very truly yours,


Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-President