

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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September 22, 2011

SENT VIA FAX & U.S. MAIL
(417) 746-9950

Mr. Don D. Forrest
Superintendent
Norwood School District
675 N. Hawk Avenue
Norwood, MO 65717-9635

COPY

Re: Gideon Bible Distribution

Dear Mr. Forrest:

I am writing on behalf of local complainants and other Missouri members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to object to the distribution of bibles at Norwood District Schools. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization, which works to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church. We represent over 17,000 supporters across the country, including members in Missouri.

It is our information and understanding that members of Gideons International have been allowed to distribute bibles directly outside the entrance of Norwood Elementary School during school hours. It is our understanding that two men set up a table by the entrance on school property and were handing out bibles to elementary students. We urge you to discontinue the Bible distribution of the Gideons and limit distribution of literature to school sponsored activities.

It is unconstitutional for public school districts to allow the Gideons to distribute bibles during the school day. Courts uniformly have held the distribution of bibles to students at public schools during instructional time is prohibited. *See Berger v. Rensselaer Central Sch. Corp.*, 982 F.2d 1160 (7th Cir. 1993)(held that classroom distribution of Gideon bibles to fifth-graders violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution); *see also Tudor v. Board of Education of Rutherford*, 14 N.J. 31 (1953), *cert. denied*, 348 U.S. 816 (1954)(finding unconstitutional a school board resolution permitting the distribution of bibles by Gideons). In striking down a school district's policy permitting Gideons to distribute bibles at the schools, the Seventh Circuit stated, "... the Gideon Bible is unabashedly Christian. In permitting distribution of 'The New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ' along with limited excerpts from the Old Testament, the schools affront not only non-religious people but all those whose faiths, or lack of faith, does not encompass the New Testament."

Public schools have a constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion. When a

school distributes religious literature to its students, even passively, it has unconstitutionally entangled itself with a religious message, in this case a Christian message. Such a practice alienates those non-Christian students, teachers, and members of the public whose religious beliefs are inconsistent with the message being promoted by the school. It also alienates the 15% of the U.S. population who do not practice any religion (American Religious Identification Survey, 2008).

Even if distributions occur during non-instructional time, students who are forced to interact with the Gideons on school property (as they are required to enter and exit the building) have had their rights violated. The District cannot legally allow its campuses to be utilized by overreaching proselytizers.

Norwood schools should not allow Gideons, or any other religious groups, to come onto District property and distribute religious literature during the school day. In allowing Gideons to distribute bibles to elementary school students, Norwood School District is placing its "stamp of approval" on the religious messages contained in the Bible. Whether or not a bible is forced on a student, this policy is still an unconstitutional endorsement of religion, and specifically Christianity, by a public school.

It is unfortunate that the Gideons view public schools, particularly elementary and middle schools, as ripe territory for recruitment. Parents carefully instruct their children not to accept any gifts from strangers. The Gideon practice of distributing bibles to school children teaches them to ignore parental guidance and can pose safety risks when children have to find their way around the distributors. Parents also understandably become nervous when adult men take an over-keen interest in handing materials to their young children without parental knowledge or permission

We ask that you promptly inform us, in writing, of the steps you are taking to remedy these constitutional and parental concerns so that we may notify our complainant.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Patrick Elliott", written in a cursive style.

Patrick Elliott
Staff Attorney