

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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**SENT VIA MAIL AND EMAIL**

**[murryg@conwayschools.net](mailto:murryg@conwayschools.net)**

Dr. Greg Murry  
Conway Public Schools Superintendent  
2220 Prince St  
Conway, AR 72034

Re: Bible Distribution

Dear Dr. Murry:

I am writing on behalf of local parents and Arkansas members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to object to the distribution of bibles in schools. We urge you to immediately put a stop to these distributions. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization, which works to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church. We represent over 16,500 supporters across the country, including many in Arkansas.

It is our information and understanding that, on May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2011, the assistant superintendent, Mr. Carroll Bishop, allowed members of Gideons International to distribute bibles to fifth and sixth grade students at Ruth Doyle Intermediate School. It is our information and understanding that this occurred in conjunction with an assembly ("Chicken Dance") that all students attended during instructional time, and that the Gideons were located inside the school building, specifically in the hallway outside of the cafeteria exit. It is our information and understanding that Gideons have been allowed to distribute their bibles on school grounds in previous years as well.

It is unconstitutional for public school districts to allow bibles to be distributed during the school day. Courts uniformly have held that 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); *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); *Roark v. South Iron R-1 Sch. Dist.*, 573 F.3d 556 (8th Cir. 2009) (striking down a school policy allowing bible distribution in the school). In striking down a school district's policy permitting Gideons to distribute bibles in public 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, 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 identify as non-religious (American Religious Identification Survey, 2008).

The Conway Public School District cannot allow Gideons, or any other religious groups, to come into any of its schools or onto school grounds to distribute religious literature during the school day. In allowing Gideons to distribute bibles to impressionable young school children — whom courts have also noted will feel immense social pressure to accept the bible — Conway Public Schools 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 practice is still an unconstitutional endorsement of religion, and specifically Christianity, by a public school. This matter is especially concerning given the young and impressionable age of intermediate school students.

We ask that you promptly inform us, in writing, of the steps you are taking to remedy these constitutional concerns so that we may notify our complainants. The school district must ensure the Gideons will not be allowed to proselytize a captive audience of young schoolchildren by distributing Christian literature on school grounds. We suggest a district-wide memo advising District officials and school principals of the illegality of the Gideon's predatory and aggressive proselytizing on school property.

Sincerely,



Patrick C. Elliott  
Staff Attorney

PCE:kdf

cc: Debi Avra, Principal, Ruth Doyle Intermediate – avrad@conwayschools.net