

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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August 3, 2017

SENT BY MAIL AND FAX TO:
(662) 412-3157

Mr. Mike Moore
Superintendent
Calhoun County School District
119 West Main Street
Pittsboro, MS 38951

Re: Illegal religious endorsement in multiple schools

Dear Superintendent Moore:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to alert you to a serious violation of the First Amendment occurring in Calhoun County School District. FFRF is a nationwide nonprofit organization with more than 29,000 members across the country including many members in Mississippi. Our purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

It is our understanding that Bruce High School, Calhoun City High School, Vardaman High School, and Calhoun Academy all recently held “prayer walks.” We understand that each prayer walk was a group prayer event that took place on public school property and was organized, staffed, and led by school faculty. Further, when interviewed about the events, multiple faculty members made remarks that were clear endorsements of religion in general and Christianity in particular. One teacher, for instance, described the purpose of the prayer walks as, “to be able to lift our school systems up, to encourage them, especially those who believe, who are Christians.”

We write to ensure that Calhoun County School District does not allow its employees to organize or participate in future religious events while acting as district representatives.

First, these prayer walks unconstitutionally entangle school personnel with an exclusively religious—exclusively Christian—message. Public school teachers may not lead, direct, or ask students to engage in prayer or otherwise endorse religion. The Supreme Court has continually struck down teacher or school-led prayer in public schools. *See, e.g. Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962) (declaring prayers in public schools unconstitutional); *Sch. Dist. of Abington Twp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963) (declaring unconstitutional devotional Bible reading and recitation of the Lord’s Prayer in public schools); *Sante Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2000) (striking down a school policy that authorized students to vote on whether to hold a prayer at high school football games); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992) (ruling prayers at public high school graduations an impermissible establishment of religion); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38 (1985) (overturning law requiring daily “period of silence not to exceed one minute . . . for meditation or daily prayer”).

Calhoun County School District has an obligation under the law to make certain that “subsidized teachers do not inculcate religion.” *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602, 619 (1971). The District should make certain that teachers in its schools are not unlawfully and inappropriately indoctrinating students in religious matters by encouraging them to engage in prayer during an event designed to blur the lines between religion and the public schools. Bruce High School principal Dallas Gore stated that through the prayer walk he and his teachers intended to “change the culture of the school.” This remark sends a clear message to students and their families that their teachers and principal favor Christians. Before the school year has even started, Principal Gore has alienated students who do not subscribe to his personal religion.

School sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible “because it sends the ancillary message to . . . nonadherents ‘that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.’” *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309-10 (2000) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. at 668 (O’Connor, J., concurring)). Calhoun County Schools should be particularly mindful of ostracizing non-Christians, given that over 43% of millennials and younger Americans are non-Christian, either practicing a minority religion or no religion at all.¹

Principle Gore was correct when he observed that “these children are moldable” and “these children are still impressionable.” The fact that these prayer walks were targeted at students who are so young and impressionable makes the event particularly unlawful. The district must heed the Supreme Court’s declaration that “the preservation and transmission of religious beliefs and worship is a responsibility and a choice committed to the private sphere.” *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 530 U.S. at 310 (quoting *Lee*, 505 U.S. at 589).

Calhoun County School District must make certain that its teachers are not unlawfully and inappropriately indoctrinating students in religious matters. Faculty must not organize future prayer walks within the district and district administrators should issue a public apology for the proselytizing statements made at this years’ events. We request an immediate investigation and response in writing outlining the steps you are taking to protect the right of conscience of the district’s minority religious and nonreligious students and families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sam Grover', written over a horizontal line.

Sam Grover
Associate Counsel

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¹ *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (May 12, 2015), available at www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.