

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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SENT VIA U.S. MAIL & EMAIL: bigjamestwin@yahoo.com

Mike James Sr.
President
Okmulgee Board of Education
316 E. 8th Street
Okmulgee, OK 74447

Re: Unconstitutional Religious Promotion

Dear President James and Okmulgee Board of Education members:

I am writing on behalf the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to alert you to serious constitutional concerns over statements made by Okmulgee Public Schools (OPS) Superintendent Renee Dove. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with 32,000 members across the country, including members in Oklahoma. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

It is our understanding that on February 24, 2018, Superintendent Renee Dove spoke at a “prayer walk” for Okmulgee County. During her talk, Superintendent Dove detailed multiple ways that she has been using her position as superintendent to spread her personal religion to students in OPS, including asking librarians to get out the bible and direct children to it, and encouraging parents to instruct their children to bring up bible stories in the classroom so that Christian teachers can let them share those religious stories with the entire class. She stated:

“I have the privilege of leading 1,400 children and have the privilege of working with 200 staff members, and the number one things I am trying to get across to them is that every time those of us that have accepted Christ as lord and savior and we walk into our buildings, Christ is there. He is not blocked out of our schools, we take him there every day. He is present in your classrooms. You pray over those classrooms. You pray over that building. **I ask my librarians to please get the Bible out and put it on top of the shelf and to lead children to it...**we are allowing Satan to tell us a lie when we say we can't have Jesus in school. Because we can. We can have God's word in school. So we started putting that back in there and putting that back on top of the shelves.”

“...and leading children to speak up. And that's what you as parents, as church leaders, you encourage your children to come with a boldness to school and speak the word and start talking about stories from God's word and start telling their teacher, 'at Sunday school I said this,' **because those Christian teachers will begin to pick up on that. I know as a teacher that's exactly what I did. And I was able to take that, because if they tell the story first, we as teachers can lead them to tell the whole classroom. We can't, but they certainly can. And so, I encourage you to do that.**¹

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/1564692773593324/videos/1825208050875127/>

Superintendent Dove can no longer be allowed to abuse her position as superintendent to promote her personal religion or encourage other OPS staff to do so. She must refrain from directing school employees to promote the bible to students and from encouraging parents to instruct their children to bring up religious stories in class.

It is well settled that public schools may not advance or promote religion. *See generally, Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38 (1985); *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97 (1967); *Sch. Dist. of Abington Twp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962). No school district or administrator may urge religious points of view on students, either by directing staff members to promote the bible to students or by instructing parents to direct their children to tell bible stories during class.

Superintendent Dove's conduct sends a message of religious preference that is itself unconstitutional. "School sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible because it sends the ancillary message to members of the audience who are 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. 668, 688 (1984) (O'Connor, J., concurring)). When a district administrator brags about directing staff and parents to promote religion over non-religion, and in this case Christianity over all other faiths, to impressionable students, it alienates those non-Christian students whose religious beliefs are inconsistent with the message being promoted. It alienates the 47% of young Americans who are non-Christian.²

Furthermore, parents expect that public school staff members will act in accordance with the Constitution and refrain from proselytizing students. "Families entrust public schools with the education of their children, but condition their trust on the understanding that the classroom will not purposely be used to advance religious views that may conflict with the private beliefs of the student and his or her family." *Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 U.S. 578, 584 (1987).

Okmulgee Public Schools must take immediate action to ensure that its students' rights of conscience are being protected and that the district refrains from promoting religion in any way. It is particularly concerning that the superintendent of schools, who is tasked with assuring constitutional compliance in the district, would use her position to promote her personal religion to district students.

We ask that you commence an immediate investigation into Superintendent Dove's conduct and provide written assurances that Superintendent Dove will no longer be using her position at OPS to promote her personal religion to district students.

Sincerely,



Christopher Line
Patrick O'Reiley Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Cc: Renee Dove, Superintendent of Schools via rdove@okmulgeeps.com

² Robert P. Jones & Daniel Cox. *America's Changing Religious Identity*. PUBLIC RELIGION RESEARCH INSTITUTE (Sept. 6, 2017). available at www.ppri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf.