

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

February 12, 2015

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL AND EMAIL TO: jblocker@checotah.k12.ok.us

Ms. Janet Blocker
Superintendent, Checotah Public Schools
310 SW 2nd Street
Checotah, OK 74426

Re: Illegal Gideon bible distribution in public school

Dear Superintendent Blocker:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to bring your attention to a serious constitutional violation occurring within Checotah Public Schools (District). FFRF is a nationwide nonprofit organization with more than 21,500 members across the country including members in Oklahoma. Our purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

It is our information and understanding that for the past several years Jamison Faught (son of Oklahoma State Representative George Faught) and members of Gideons international, an evangelizing Christian organization, have been allowed to distribute bibles within District schools. Mr. Fought recently bragged that he was able to hand out "New Testaments to 194 5th graders in three different schools," including schools in your District. Please see the attached image. Mr. Faught also claimed that on one occasion Principal Ryan Ambrose, of Checotah Intermediate School, not only escorted him to each classroom, but also distributed bibles himself. These allegations, if true, violate the Constitution and breach the trust between the District and parents – who are responsible for the religious or non-religious education of their children.

We understand that you probably had no prior knowledge of this distribution. The Gideons operate by deliberately avoiding superintendents and school boards. They advise their members to seek permission at the lowest level of authority. Usually, they target teachers and principals. Under no circumstances are the local Gideon groups permitted to ask for a legal opinion from the state or school district—and with good reason, because the law clearly prohibits bible distributions in public schools.

It is unconstitutional for public school districts to permit the distribution of bibles as part of the public school day. Courts have uniformly held that the distribution of bibles to students at public schools 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. Bd. of Educ. 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 in classrooms, 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." *Berger*, 982 F.2d at 1170.

Gideons International is self-described as an interdenominational association of Christian business and

professional men who are members of Protestant/evangelical churches. Their website states that they are “dedicated to telling people about Jesus through sharing personally and by providing Bibles and New Testaments.” The Gideon website openly refers to community schools as a prime target. They traditionally distribute New Testament bibles.¹

The District may not allow any religious groups or individuals to enter school property to distribute bibles or religious literature, allow teachers to pass out Bibles, or allow any administrator, teacher, or staff member to give religious messages, symbols, displays or advertisements to school children.

Again, we recognize that you may not have known about this distribution precisely because that is how the Gideons operate. But we must reiterate that public schools have a constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion and to protect the rights of conscience of young and impressionable students. When a school distributes permits evangelists to distribute religious literature to its students, it entangles itself with that religious message. As well as alienating non-Christian students, teachers, and members of the public whose religious beliefs are inconsistent with the message being promoted by the school, such bible distribution alienates the one in five Americans, and one in three young adults, who now identify as nonreligious.²

It is unfortunate that Jamison Faught and his fellow evangelizers view public 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 schoolchildren teaches them to ignore that guidance. Parents also understandably become nervous when adult men take an over-keen interest in handing materials to their young children without their knowledge or permission. It is also a usurpation of parental authority — parents have the right to direct the religious, or non-religious, upbringing of their children, not public schools.

This predatory conduct is inappropriate and should raise many red flags. In allowing Gideons to distribute bibles to elementary school students, the District is impermissibly endorsing religion by placing its “stamp of approval” on the religious messages in the bible and the Gideons’ discussion of the bible.

Please let us know if you were even aware of this distribution and inform us in writing at your earliest convenience of the steps you are taking to remedy this serious constitutional violation so that we may assure our complainant that the violation will not recur.

Sincerely,



Andrew L. Seidel
Staff Attorney

ALS:jki

Enc.

¹ See, generally, The Gideons International, <http://www.gideons.org> (last visited February 11, 2015).

² “Nones on the Rise,” Pew Research Center, The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (October 9, 2012).



Jamison Fought with Justin Knight

2 hrs ·

Spending the morning with fellow Gideons passing out Bibles to 5th grade students in Checotah, Eufaula and Stidham.

Like · Comment · Share



21 people like this.



Scott An Kristen Price I'm surprised you're allowed to do that.

2 hrs · Like



Jamison Fought Last several years, we've been able to do it at every school in McIntosh, Okmulgee and Okfuskee counties except one or two. Last year, the Checotah principal not only personally took us to each classroom, but he helped us hand them out!

1 hr · Like · 1



Twyla Bullock Awesome thing you're doing there Jamison!

1 hr · Like



Kirstyn Brown I wish we were allowed to do it.

1 hr · Like



Jamison Fought We handed out New Testaments to 194 5th graders in three different schools.

20 mins · Like