

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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February 2, 2017

SENT VIA EMAIL:

quincie.moore@cherokee1.org

Dr. Quincie Moore
Superintendent
Cherokee County School District
141 Twin Lake Rd.
Gaffney, SC 29341

Re: URGENT – Scheduled unconstitutional religious instruction on Feb. 3

Dear Dr. Moore:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation to alert you to a serious constitutional violation at Grassy Pond Elementary School. We were contacted by a concerned parent of one of your students. FFRF is a national non-profit organization with more than 26,000 members across the county, including members in South Carolina. Our purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

We understand that Grassy Pond Elementary School has scheduled a reading tomorrow of the book “Jesus, Please Heal My Dog” by Dipali Britton. A parent reports receiving the attached notice from the school that students would be read the book by the author and that the book would specially be made available for purchase. The school announcement says, “This story teaches Bible verses, the importance of obedience, thankfulness, and the power of prayers.” The story involves a dog being healed when “family and friends come together and pray without ceasing.”

This type of instruction in a public elementary school is blatantly unconstitutional and must be stopped immediately.

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); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Sch. Dist. of Abington Twp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963). Public schools may not promote prayer, bible verses, and religious stories as part of instruction during the school day. The school’s actions violate the principle 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. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 310 (2000) (*quoting Lee*, 505 U.S. at 589).

The Supreme Court has recognized that “[f]amilies 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) (finding unconstitutional a statute allowing the teaching of creationism, a religious belief, in classrooms).

Even if the presentation were voluntary, that would not exempt the school from abiding by constitutional requirements. *See Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. at 596 (“It is a tenet of the First Amendment that the State cannot require one of its citizens to forfeit his or her rights and benefits as the price of resisting conformance to state-sponsored religious practice.”); *Schempp*, 374 U.S. at 288 (Brennan, J., concurring) (“Thus, the short, and to me sufficient, answer is that the availability of excusal or exemption simply has no relevance to the establishment question”); *Mellen v. Bunting*, 327 F.3d 355, 372 (4th Cir. 2003) (“VMI cannot avoid Establishment Clause problems by simply asserting that a cadet’s attendance at supper or his or her participation in the supper prayer are ‘voluntary.’”).

It is unconstitutional and inappropriate for a school to promote Christian instruction in schools, including the promotion of bible verses and the claimed power of prayer. That concern is especially important to keep in mind given the young age of students involved. There is no doubt that many parents of students have different religious and non-religious beliefs. This story alienates those nonreligious students, families, teachers, and members of the public whose religious beliefs are inconsistent with the message being promoted by the school.

We request that you take immediate action by informing Grassy Pond Elementary School staff and any other relevant District employees that this event is canceled. Please let us know what action you are taking so that we may notify our local complainant.

Sincerely,



Patrick C. Elliott
Staff Attorney

Enclosure

CC:

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