

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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December 13, 2019

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: rshearouse@effingham.k12.ga.us

Dr. Randy Shearouse
Superintendent
Effingham County Schools
405 North Ash Street
Springfield, GA 31329

Re: Gideon Bible Distribution

Dear Superintendent Shearouse:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a disturbing report we have received that Gideons have been allowed to distribute bibles in Effingham County Schools. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 30,000 members across the country, including more than 500 members and a chapter in Georgia. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

Multiple concerned parents have reported that Ebenezer Elementary School and Marlow Elementary School allowed Gideons to enter classrooms, preach to students about the significance of the bible, and distribute bibles to students, including our complainants' children. It is our understanding that every child was given a bible, but they were told that they could return it to the teacher if they didn't want it.

We understand that you may have 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 Gideon Society to distribute bibles as part of the public school day. Courts have uniformly 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) (holding 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 Gideons to distribute bibles). 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 an association of Christian business and professional men who are members of Protestant/evangelical churches.¹ They are "dedicated to telling people about Jesus . . . by providing Bibles

¹ See www.gideons.org/faq.

and New Testaments” and their website openly refers to “students in the fifth grade and above” as prime targets.²

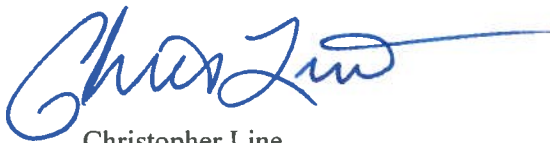
Public schools have a constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion and to protect the rights of conscience of young and impressionable students. When a school distributes religious literature to its students, or permits evangelists to distribute religious literature to its students, it entangles itself with that religious message. Bible distributions alienate the 24% of Americans, including 38% of young adults, who identify as nonreligious.³

The District may not allow Gideons, or any other religious groups, to enter school property to distribute religious literature. 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 contained in the bible.

Parents carefully instruct children not to accept gifts from strangers. The Gideon practice is a usurpation of parental authority, and can pose safety risks when children have to run a gauntlet of aggressive adults hawking religious literature on school property. It is the duty of public school administrators to protect not only the personal conscience of students but to ensure they are safe from predatory adults while at school.

Please let us know if you were 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 complainants that the violation will not recur.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Line". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

Christopher Line
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

² See www.gideons.org/about.

³ 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.