

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

December 20, 2018

SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL:
doanm@u40gw.effingham.k12.il.us

Mr. Mark Doan
Superintendent
Effingham CUSD #40
P. O. Box 130
Effingham, IL 62401

Re: Religious elementary school math assignment

Dear Superintendent Doan:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation regarding a religious assignment that was recently given to 4th-graders at Central Grade School. We appreciate your prompt attention to prior state/church complaints and we hope that you can take appropriate action to address this concern as well.

A concerned District parent contacted us to report that a 4th-grade math assignment at Central Grade School consisted of counting the total number of gifts given in the lyrics of the song, "The Twelve Days of Christmas." Completely superfluous to the math assignment, we understand that students were given religious metaphors for each lyric in the song.¹ The enclosed copy of the assignment states that "the 'true love' of the song refers to God," "The partridge in a pear tree was Jesus Christ," "The eight Maids A-milking were the eight beatitudes," etc.

This overt religious instruction is unconstitutional. We request that the District investigate this math assignment and take appropriate steps to ensure that District teachers will not teach religious lessons in the future.

As you know, public schools may not advance or promote religion. Specifically, public schools have a duty to ensure that instructional materials

¹ Incidentally, in addition to being inappropriate religious instruction, this explanation is inaccurate. See, e.g., <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/twelve-days-christmas/> (investigating the claim that "The Twelve Days of Christmas" was created as a coded reference to important articles of the Christian faith and concluding that the claim is "False").

do not promote a particular religious viewpoint. *See Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 U.S. 578, 583 (1987) (finding unconstitutional a statute allowing the teaching of creationism, a religious belief, in classrooms). The Supreme Court in *Edwards* 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.” *Id.* at 584.

It is unconstitutional and completely inappropriate for a public school teacher to use a simple arithmetic assignment as an excuse to provide students with a (historically dubious) mnemonic device for Christian theology. If a teacher asked to insert a mnemonic device for the five pillars of Islam into a generic math assignment, we are confident the assignment would not have been approved. There is no legitimate reason to treat Christian instruction any differently.

We request a written response detailing the steps that the District takes to ensure that District teachers will refrain from promoting religion to their students in the future. Given that this is the third instance of inappropriate promotion of Christianity by the District in the past year, we hope that some additional action will be taken to ensure that all District staff understand their obligations under the Establishment Clause. Thank you for your assistance in addressing these concerns.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ryan D. Jayne". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Ryan D. Jayne
Staff Attorney

Enclosure