

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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March 8, 2016

SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL:

Maryjo.slick@email.sparcc.org

Ms. Mary Jo Shannon Slick, Esq.
Stark County Educational Service Center
2100 38th St., NW
Canton, OH 44709

Re: Religious instruction at Green Middle School

Dear Ms. Slick:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. We appreciate your assistance in resolving several issues last year regarding prayer at school events in Green County Schools. A concerned District community member brought another constitutional concern to our attention. We hope this can also be quickly resolved.

It is our understanding that Green Middle School Language Arts teacher Kelli Hunka has included religious assignments every month since at least December, 2015, as part of a monthly student journal requirement. The assignments, which are attached for your review, asked students to do the following:

- **December:** "What is your favorite Christmas carol? With your very best penmanship, copy a verse or two into your journal, and illustrate it!" (along with a drawing of a gift with a tag reading, "Merry CHRISTmas!");
- **January:** "Write and illustrate a prayer for the new year";
- **February:** "Copy John 3:16 into your journal. Write about how perfect God's love is. (optional)";
- **March:** "Illustrate Isaiah 11:6...The Peaceable Kingdom. Look up Edward Hicks and write a little about him."

These assignments, optional or not, are unconstitutional in a public school. Any reasonable student would understand their teacher to be endorsing Christianity when she asks students to write prayers and repeatedly asks students to copy or illustrate bible verses. We are writing to request that the District stop this practice immediately.

As you know, public schools may not endorse religion over nonreligion, or any one religion over another. In these journal assignments, Hunka included

assignments from the Christian bible, but no other religious texts. These assignments are not part of a study of comparative religion or history of religion, but rather provide lessons in Christianity to supplement the other journal assignments. Hunka's emphasis of "Christ" in "Christmas" underlines her endorsement of Christianity.

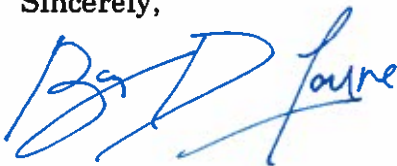
Reading bible verses as a religious exercise (such as writing about "how perfect God's love is") violates the Establishment Clause. *See, e.g., Abington Twp. Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963) (striking down a daily requirement that public school students read at least ten bible verses and recite the Lord's Prayer, even though parents could opt their children out of these practices).

For decades, federal courts have consistently prohibited religious instruction in public schools. In FFRF's lawsuit against religious instruction in Rhea County, Tennessee, the Court said, "This is not a close case. Since 1948, it has been very clear that the First Amendment does not permit the State to use its public school system to 'aid any or all religious faiths or sects in the dissemination of their doctrines.'" *Doe v. Porter*, 188 F. Supp. 2d 904, 914 (E.D. Tenn 2002) (quoting *McCullum*, 333 U.S. at 211), *aff'd*, 370 F.3d 558 (6th Cir. 2004).

Designating religious assignments as "optional" does not change this conclusion. Courts have summarily rejected arguments that voluntariness excuses a constitutional violation. *See Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577, 596 (1992) ("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").

District teachers may not utilize student journal assignments to indoctrinate students in Christian dogma. Please respond with written assurances that the District will stop this unconstitutional religious instruction.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ryan D. Jayne". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping "R" and "J".

Ryan D. Jayne, Esq.
Diane Uhl Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure

"Chill December brings the sleet;
Blazing fire and Christmas treat."

December

Dec 12-18-19

I heard a bird sing
In the dark of December.
A magical thing.
And sweet to remember.
We are nearer to Spring
Than we were in September.
I heard a bird sing
In the dark of December.

-Oliver Herford



Are there any birds living in your tree? Maybe they would like a special treat! Make an edible craft for them this Christmas!



Draw some sketches of the birds that are in your backyard during the month of December!



What holiday traditions are important to your family? Write about them in your journal. Which is your favorite?



Draw a "still life" of Christmas decorations in your home.



Research the meanings of the colors of Christmas! Devote a page in your journal to "Red" or "Green."



Think about the significance of gift-giving at Christmas. What was the best gift you ever received? What gifts can you give that cost only time?



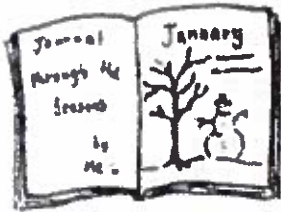
Copy your favorite Christmas cookie recipe into your journal. Bake a batch with your parents or grandparents!

Doodle of the month: Packages!



to give to every
the children around

January



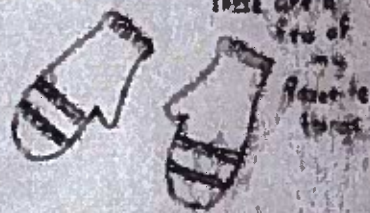
"A wet January, a wet spring"

"January brings the snow,
Makes our feet and fingers glow"

* Illustrate a title page for the month of January! Take great care in planning the layout and lettering. Draw a border or a picture to represent the first month of the year. Add the stanza from "The Months" by Sara Coleridge (at the top of this page!) to your title page.

* Write and illustrate a prayer for the new year.

* Make a list of your new year's resolutions.



* Take a winter walk and find something interesting to draw. Write about the weather and the sounds you hear as you walk.

Winter

The world's a radiant princess in her dress of snowy white,
With diamonds sparkling on her breast throughout the day and night.
Her dazzling beauty glistens in the robes so ermine pure,
That breathtaking in her loveliness she makes us very sure
Of God, who sees His handiwork from heaven high above,
And takes this perfect way to show His heart so full of love.
- Marion Benedict Maxwell

* Copy this poem in your journal and illustrate it! Find another winter poem or write your own!

* Adopt a tree near your home. Draw what it looks like in January. (Deciduous trees are best for this activity... they change!)

* Identify birds that visit your feeder. Sketch them and write about their activities.

* Find a cozy spot in your home. Draw it or some part of it. Write about spending time there. Add this quote:

"In happy homes he saw the light
of household fires gleam warm and bright."
- Cicero

* Copy a favorite recipe in your journal or write about a favorite meal. "Comfort food" is important in the cold months of winter. Prepare your recipe and enjoy it with your family. Ideas: Hot cocoa, Beef Stew, Gingerbread, Rice Pudding.

Doodle of the month: Snowflakes!

♥ "February brings the rain,
Thaws the frozen lake again."

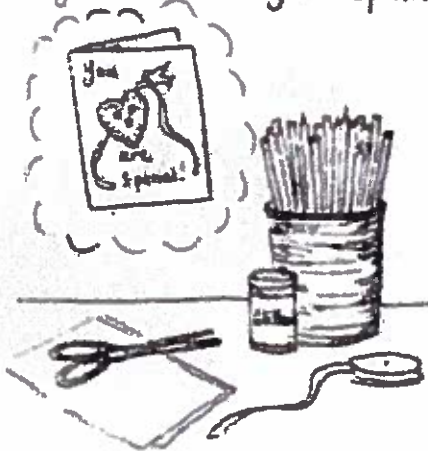
February

♥ Illustrate a title page for the month of February.
Include the poem above!

"If
February
brings no
rain,

'tis neither good
for grass
nor grain."

♥ Did the groundhog see his shadow where you live? Sketch a groundhog in your journal. Write your opinion of this tradition... and your hopes for Spring!



♥ Read a book about Abraham Lincoln. Devote a page to him in your journal. Draw a log cabin in the woods and copy this quote by Lincoln:
"History is not history unless it is the truth."

♥ George Washington thought manners were important. In your best penmanship, copy some of his "Rules of Civility." Add an interesting border to the page.

♥ Create a beautiful valentine and glue it (carefully!) into your journal.

♥ Sketch your tree again!

♥ Copy John 3:16 into your journal. Write about how perfect God's love is. (Optional)

♥ Research how the heart works. Draw a detailed sketch of the heart showing how blood flows through it.

My husband was my first sweetheart. For my 12th birthday, he gave me a little rock that had "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways." painted on it. When you turn it over, it has tally marks on the back. I still have it. :-)

♥ Write about your first crush/love. -Kim

Doodle of the month: Hearts!

♥ Copy and illustrate in your journal.

Try making different shaped hearts, keeping them symmetrical, or 3-D!

How do I love thee? ♥♥♥
Let me count the ways. ♥♥♥
I love thee to the depth ♥♥♥
And breadth and height ♥♥♥
My soul can reach, ♥♥♥
When feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being ♥♥♥
And ideal Grace.
I love thee to the level of
Every day's most quiet need,
by sun and candlelight.
-Elizabeth Barrett Browning

March

"March brings breezes, loud and shrill,
to stir the dancing daffodil."

* Illustrate a title page for March using the poem above. Make it look breezy!

* Did March come in like a lion or a lamb? Record the weather on March 1st... and again on March 31st!

* Illustrate Isaiah 11:6... The Peaceable Kingdom. Look up Edward Hicks and write a little about him.

* Draw your tree. You may begin to see some changes.

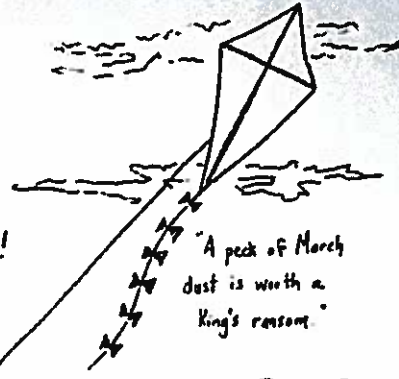
* Research St. Patrick and write a few sentences about him. Are there any legends about him? Did you know he used the shamrock to teach the Irish about the Trinity? Draw a shamrock border on his page!

* Take a walk and record the first signs of spring you find.

~~You can get an early start in the garden! Plant the 3 P's...
Peas, Potatoes, + Parsley...
Oh! and onions!~~



Matthias Mary
Quite Contrary
How does your
garden
grow!



Kite Days


A kite, a sky, and a good firm breeze,
And acres of ground away from trees,
And one hundred yards of clean, strong string -
O boy, O boy! "I call that Spring!"

Mark Sawyer

* Go fly a kite! Then write about it in your journal. Draw a colorful kite and copy the poem "Kite Days."

* On a piece of graph paper, plot out a small garden. Look through seed catalogs for inspiration. Carefully glue (or tape) your garden plan into your journal. This is a fun activity to do on a cold, left-over winter day.

* Find a daffodil (or a picture of one) and sketch it in your journal.

"Daffy-down-dilly is come up to town,
in her yellow petticoat
And her green gown." 

Doodle of the month: Shamrocks!

