

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

February 17, 2017

SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL:
rreese@jgsc.k12.in.us

Mr. Richard M. Reese
Superintendent
John Glenn School Corporation
101 John Glenn Drive
Walkerton, Indiana 46574

Re: Religious posts on school social media

Dear Superintendent Reese:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation to alert you to constitutional violations in your school district. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 27,000 members across the country, including more than 400 members in Indiana. FFRF's purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

A concerned District community member contacted us to report that North Liberty Elementary School's official Facebook page regularly includes religious posts and messages. Sample posts are enclosed for your review and include:

- A New Testament Verse, 1 John 4:7, accompanying a picture of two young students;
- A picture entitled "WHAT CHRISTMAS IS ALL ABOUT," with the New Testament verse Luke 2:9–11;
- A picture of a Christian nativity with the quote "I bring you tidings of great joy"¹;
- A promotion of a local church's "Vacation Bible School," a program of Christian religious instruction,² with the comment "Well, this looks like fun!";
- A promotion of a prayer event at the school's flagpole, stating "Prayer at the flagpole tomorrow morning at 7:40 am. All are welcome." The school followed this up by commenting, "Great turn out! Loved seeing so many there. Thank you, Ann Camblin, for leading. What a blessing!"

¹ This is a quote from the same New Testament verse, Luke 2:9–11.

² See vacationbibleschool.com.

- A post thanking a local church for “kind words and PRAYERS!”;
- A photo of a young student holding up a book that says, “For Christian Good Shine on”;
- A picture reading, “God said, ‘Let there be happiness,’ and there were books.”;
- A picture of a young child praying, with the caption “Lord, please give us strength to hold out until spring break”; and
- A picture of Star Wars’ Yoda with the caption, “Spring forward you must or late to church you will be.”

These posts show a clear trend of promoting religion in general, and Christianity in particular. We recognize that the last three of these posts were light-hearted and were perhaps not intended to endorse a religious message, but they are still inappropriate on a public elementary school’s Facebook page, particularly when that page has regular religious content. We request assurances that the page will be free from any religious promotion in the future, including bible verses, promotions of religious events, and references to the religious aspects of Christmas or other holidays.

As an initial matter, it is a fundamental principle of Establishment Clause jurisprudence that a public school may not advance, prefer, or promote religion. *See generally Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38 (1985); *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97 (1967); *Sch. Dist. of Abington Twp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962). Public schools have a constitutional obligation to remain neutral on matters of religion.

Courts have continually held that public school districts may not endorse religious messages, including bible verses. *See Stone v. Graham*, 449 U.S. 39 (1980) (ruling that the Ten Commandments may not be displayed on classroom walls); *Washegesic v. Bloomington Pub. Schs.*, 813 F. Supp. 559 (W.D. Mi. 1993), *aff’d* 33 F. 3d 679 (6th Cir. 1994) (ruling that a picture of Jesus may not be displayed in a public school); *Ahlquist v. City of Cranston ex rel. Strom*, 840 F. Supp. 2d 507 (D.R.I. 2012) (striking down a prayer mural in a high school auditorium).

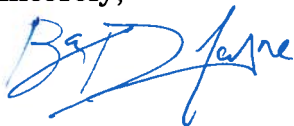
Publishing bible verses and advertising for religious instruction on the school’s social media page gives the appearance that the school, and the school district, endorse those religious messages. It sends the message that the district prefers not only religion over nonreligion, but Christianity over all other faiths. This “[s]chool sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible because it sends the ancillary message to . . . nonadherents ‘that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an

accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.” *Santa Fe*, 530 U.S. at 309–10 (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (O’Connor, J., concurring)).

It is unconstitutional for District staff to plan, promote, or participate in student prayer events just before the school day. Doing so alienates non-Christian students, teachers, and parents whose religious beliefs are inconsistent with the message being promoted by the school staff including the 35% of Americans born after 1981 who are not religious.³ Any religious events must be entirely student-initiated and student-run. While the District cannot prohibit students from organizing or participating in a prayer event, the Supreme Court has stated that public school staff members must refrain from participating in the religious activities of students while acting within their governmental roles to avoid any perception of government endorsement of religion. *Bd. of Educ. of the Westside Cmty. Sch. v. Mergens*, 496 U.S. 226, 253 (1990).

We ask that all future school-sponsored social media posts do not include religious messages or other promotions of religion. Please reply in writing with the steps taken to remedy this matter.

Sincerely,

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

Ryan D. Jayne, Esq.
Elaine & Eric Stone Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure

³ *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (May 12, 2015), available at pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.



North Liberty Elementary School added a new photo.

November 18 at 6:49am · 🌐

📶 AT&T

6:48 AM

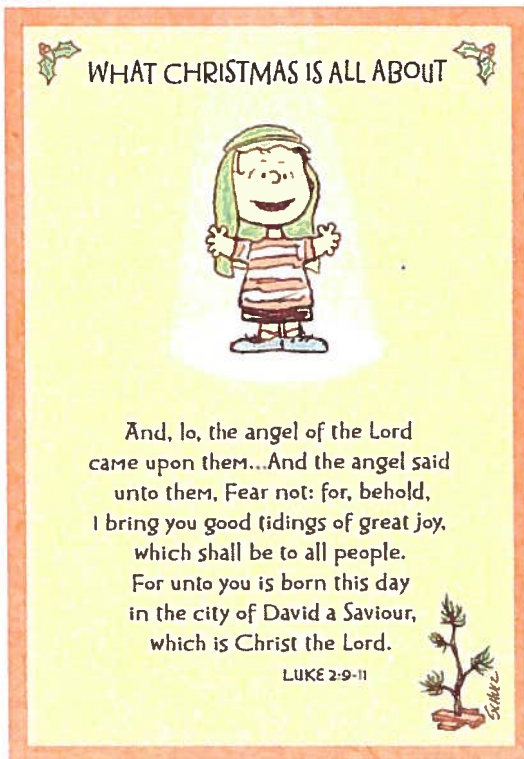


facebook.com

PRECIOUS MOMENT : Two little girls hold hands during nap time. A school posted the picture with this caption, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. 1 John 4:7"



North Liberty Elementary School added a new photo.
December 22, 2016 · 🌐



👍 Like 💬 Comment ➦ Share



North Liberty Elementary School
December 25, 2014 · 🌐

"I bring you good tidings of great joy."



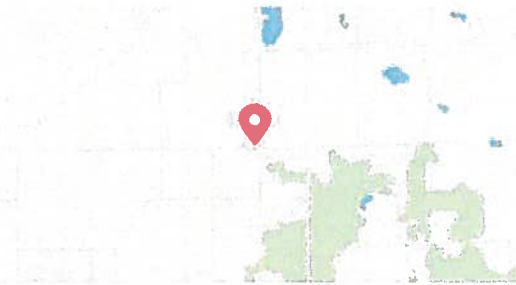
👍 Like 💬 Comment ➦ Share



North Liberty Elementary School
July 11, 2016 · 🌐

Well, this looks like fun!

Vacation bible school starts tonight and goes through Thursday at Sumption Prairie UMC. We start with an optional dinner at 5:15pm (all family members are welcome). VBS is 6-8pm. Please share this post and invite your friends. This year we are visiting the SURF SHACK!!!



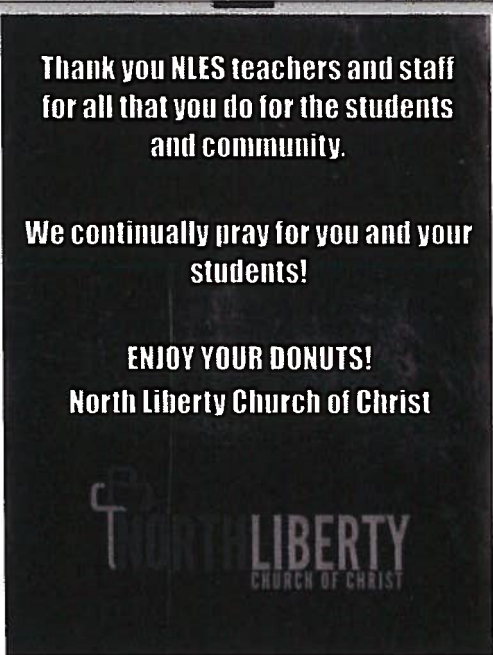
Sumption Prairie United ...
★★★★★
Religious Center

Like Comment Share



North Liberty Elementary School
February 13 at 1:09pm · 🌐

North Liberty Church of Christ Folks, THANK YOU for spoiling us with a special treat. Thank you for your kind words and your PRAYERS!



Like Comment Share



North Liberty Elementary School
May 4, 2016 · 🌐

Prayer at the flagpole tomorrow morning at 7:40 am. All are welcome. (Approximately 10 minutes, students will be in plenty of time for school).



Like Comment Share

68

Chronological*

19 shares



North Liberty Elementary School Great turnout! Loved seeing so many there. Thank you, Ann Cambria, for leading. What a blessing!
Like Reply 3 · May 5, 2016 at 7:20am · Edited



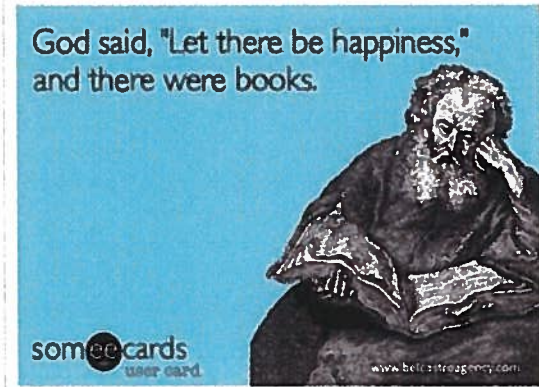
North Liberty Elementary School added a new photo.
April 27 · 🌐



Like Comment Share

North Liberty Elementary School
June 13

Get your goal completed by June 20th! Quizzing (and free lunches) tomorrow (Tuesday) 11-2!



Like Comment Share

North Liberty Elementary School added a new photo.
March 9



Like Comment Share

North Liberty Elementary School added a new photo.
March 18



Like Comment Share