

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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June 24, 2016

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL
jmichel@centralcths.com

James Michel
Board Chair
Jumoke Academy Charter Schools Board of Directors
127 Duncaster Road
Bloomfield, CT 06002

Re: Unconstitutional Religious Display

Dear Chairman Michel:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation occurring in Jumoke Academy Honors at the Hartford Conservatory. A concerned citizen contacted us about this matter. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with nearly 24,000 members across the country, including over 200 members in Connecticut. FFRF's purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

It is our understanding that Karen Adenekan, an academic assistant at Jumoke Academy Honors at the Hartford Conservatory, included a bible verse ("I can do all things through Christ Jesus who strengthens me."—Philippians 4:13) on her profile that hangs outside of Classroom 214. Our complainant reports having seen this profile on January 13 of this year. Enclosed are photos of the profile displayed on her classroom door.

The District violates the Constitution when it allows its schools to display religious symbols or messages. Public schools may not advance, prefer, or promote religion. *See 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). This display violates this basic constitutional prohibition by creating the appearance that the District prefers religion over nonreligion and Christianity over all other faiths.

Courts have continually held that school districts may not display religious messages or iconography in public schools. *See, e.g., Stone v. Graham*, 449 U.S. 39 (1980) (ruling that the Ten Commandments may not be displayed on classroom walls); *Lee v. York County*, 484 F.3d 689 (4th Cir. 2007) (ruling that a teacher may be barred from displaying religious messages on classroom bulletin boards); *Washegesic v. Bloomingdale Pub. Schs.*, 33 F.3d 679 (6th Cir. 1994) (ruling that a picture of Jesus may not be displayed in a public school).

Religion is a divisive force in public schools. The Supreme Court has repeatedly noted that "[s]chool sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible because it sends the ancillary

insiders, favored members of the political community.” *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309 (2000) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring)). This message is particularly impermissible when it is presented to such young and impressionable middle school students.

This religious display is particularly inappropriate given that Nearly 30% of Americans are non-Christians, either practicing a minority religion or no religion at all, and about 44% of millennials are non-Christian.¹ The display alienates those nonreligious students, families, teachers, and members of the public whose religious beliefs are inconsistent with the message being promoted by the school.

In recognition of the District’s constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion, please ensure that the District does not display religious messages. Please reply in writing with the steps you are taking to remedy this constitutional violation.

Sincerely,



Rebecca S. Markert
Staff Attorney

RSM:anz

Enclosures

cc: Troy Monroe, Ed.D.
Executive Director
Jumoke Academy District Office
834 Asylum Ave.
Hartford, CT 06105
Fax: (860) 286-1137

¹ *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (May 12, 2015), available at



JUMOKE ACADEMY CHARTER SCHOOLS

KAREN ADENEKAN



EDUCATION

- Bachelor of Science in Business Management and Leadership—Albertus Magnus College

OCCUPATIONAL EXPERIENCE

- Early Childhood Education
- Middle School Academic Assistant

WORDS OF WISDOM

"I can do all things through Christ Jesus who strengthens me."—
Philippians 4:13

