

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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July 12, 2018

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL AND EMAIL:

keith.murphy@melissaisd.org

Mr. Keith Murphy  
Superintendent  
Melissa Independent School District  
1904 Cooper Street  
Melissa, TX 75454

Re: Religious promotion at district summer program

Dear Superintendent Murphy:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to promote unconstitutional religious promotion within a Melissa ISD summer school program. As you may recall from our October 2017 letter, FFRF is a nationwide nonprofit organization with the purposes to educate the public on matters related to nontheism and to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church. We currently have more than 32,000 members across the country, including more than 1,400 members in Texas.

FFRF was informed by a concerned district parent that district employees recently permitted a church group to distribute religious paraphernalia to students participating in the district's Ignite summer school program. Students in the program each received a red water bottle advertising Melissa United Methodist Church on the side, with a Christian cross. We are told that the students participating in this program are around the age of ten.

We write to ensure that the district does not permit outside religious groups to advertise to students during school-sponsored programs in the future.

Though the district may permissibly seek donations from local businesses and community groups to supply its summer school programs, the district has an obligation to ensure that its programs remain free from religious endorsements. The Supreme Court has 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.” *Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 U.S. 578, 584 (1987). This obligation extends beyond school employees to any adult volunteering within the schools. When school employees or volunteers include religious advertising in a school-sponsored summer program, they take religion out of the private sphere and violate parental trust.

Even if these students were not compelled to take a bible by their instructors, by allowing such a distribution the school sends a message to the children in its charge who are not Methodists, and those Methodist students who go to a different church, “that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community.” *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309–10 (2000) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring)).

In many cases, FFRF learns that this sort of divisive message regarding a school's preference for religion over nonreligion or one specific religious denomination is taken up by students within the school, resulting in the bullying of those students who choose to exercise their conscience by not accepting an offered religious item. Melissa ISD should be striving to create an inclusive, secular environment in which students can learn without fear of being asked to compromise their personal beliefs and without fear of being subjected to religiously motivated bullying.

We request that the district investigate this water bottle distribution and any related partnership between the summer school program and Melissa United Methodist Church to ensure that church representatives are not being granted access to proselytize students. Please inform us in writing of the district's findings and the steps the district takes to address these constitutional concerns so that we may assure our complainant that there will be no further religious endorsements during this ongoing summer school program.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sam Grover', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Sam Grover  
Associate Counsel