

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

February 10, 2016

*SENT VIA MAIL & EMAIL:*

mmason@wolves.k12.mo.us

Mr. Michael Mason  
Superintendent  
Reeds Spring School District  
20281 State Highway 413  
Reeds Spring, MO 65737

**Re: Investigate school access granted to predatory evangelists**

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (“FFRF”) concerning youth ministers that may be visiting the Reeds Spring School District. We were contacted by a concerned parent in a neighboring school district. FFRF is a nationwide nonprofit organization that has more than 23,000 members across the country including members in Missouri. We work to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

It is our information and understanding that an adult affiliated with KLIFE Tri-Lakes has been allowed access to students in schools near Reeds Spring during the school day. We also understand that KLIFE offers programming to Reeds Spring Middle School and Reeds Spring High School students. KLIFE describes itself as a “Christian ministry to area youth.” Its website proclaims that “[t]he heartbeat of KLIFE lies in the ability to build relationships with kids and bring the content of God’s word to bear on those relationships.”

Given the egregious constitutional violations that we were alerted to taking place in Hollister School District R-V, we request that you investigate whether similar activities are taking place within Reeds Spring schools. I have enclosed a copy of the letter that we sent today to Hollister, which details the reported lunchroom visits by KLIFE and legal violations.

Your schools cannot grant Robert Bruce or KLIFE representatives access to students during the school day, including during lunch. We would appreciate it if you investigate whether visits are taking place and confirm that such visits will not be allowed. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Patrick C. Elliott  
Staff Attorney

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February 10, 2016

*SENT VIA MAIL & EMAIL:*  
[bwilson@hollister.k12.mo.us](mailto:bwilson@hollister.k12.mo.us)

Dr. Brian Wilson  
Superintendent  
Hollister R-V School District  
1914 State Highway BB  
Hollister, MO 65672

**Re: URGENT - Unconstitutional school prayer and access granted to youth pastor**

Dear Dr. Wilson:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation ("FFRF") concerning Hollister R-V School District ("District") allowing KLIFE evangelists access to students at school. We were contacted by a concerned parent of a Hollister Middle School student. FFRF is a nationwide nonprofit organization that has more than 23,000 members across the country including members in Missouri. We work to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

It is our information and understanding that an adult affiliated with KLIFE Tri-Lakes has been allowed access to students at District schools during the school day, including during the lunch period at Hollister Middle School. KLIFE describes itself as a "Christian ministry to area youth." Its website proclaims that "[t]he heartbeat of KLIFE lies in the ability to build relationships with kids and bring the content of God's word to bear on those relationships."

We were contacted by a concerned parent who reports that a video of a KLIFE youth pastor, Robert Bruce, was widely shared on social media. The video depicts an adult leading the entire lunchroom in a prayer with all of the students surrounding him in a circle.<sup>1</sup> The parent's child also reports that students were directed in a similar prayer all of last week and this week as well during the 7th grade lunch.

This is an egregious violation of the First Amendment and must be stopped immediately.

It is well settled that public schools may not advance, prefer or promote religion. *See generally, 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 Twshp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962). It is unconstitutional and inappropriate for a public school to allow a Christian youth organization to impose prayer on all students. Giving this evangelical Christian organization access to students as part of school programming suggests that the District

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<sup>1</sup> <https://goo.gl/z1YBbl>

has an unlawful preference not only for religion over non-religion, but also evangelical Christianity over other faiths. This “[s]chool sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible because it sends the ancillary message to members of the audience who are nonadherents ‘that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community and accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored 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. at 668) (O’Connor, J., concurring). This sort of entanglement between religion and public education is unseemly and inappropriate.

Schools may not allow this type of access to students to a religious organization seeking to proselytize. The Eight Circuit Court of Appeals, which has jurisdiction over Missouri, has upheld injunctions against schools for their complacency in similar situations. *See Roark v. South Iron R-1 Sch. Dist.* 540 F. Supp. 2d 1047, 1059 (E.D. Mo. 2008); *upheld in relevant part by 573 F.3d 556* (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2009) (holding that bible distributions in school were an endorsement of religion and that “[a]dditionally, the distribution’s location, time, and circumstances created an excessive entanglement with religion.”).

Moreover, it is inappropriate for public schools to offer KLIFE representatives unique access to a captive student audience on school property. When the school grants KLIFE ministers access to students, it advances KLIFE’s mission of proselytizing. In many cases we have found that similar youth programs use schools to befriend students with the goal of spreading a religious message and recruiting members for their youth groups. No religious organization should have direct access to students at school. This predatory conduct should raise red flags, especially since these adults are conversing with students without parental knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

You must immediately stop all visits to District schools during the school day by Robert Bruce and KLIFE representatives. In addition, organized prayer during the lunch period must be stopped. Any school administrative staff that allowed this to take place, and any staff charged with supervising the lunch period, must be disciplined. Parents, not the school system or KLIFE evangelists, have authority over the religious or non-religious upbringing of their children. Please let us know what steps you are taking to address this matter.

Sincerely,



Patrick C. Elliott  
Staff Attorney

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<sup>2</sup> For example, we obtained a video recording posted on social media that was taken by a KLIFE representative that appears to show a student during the lunch period. We assume that neither the parents nor the school provided prior authorization for this recording.