



Turlock Unified School District

Learning Today... Leading Tomorrow

Dana Salles Trevethan
Superintendent

June 10, 2016

By Email: maddy@FFRF.org

Madeline Ziegler, Esq.
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Re: Turlock Unified School District: School Chaplain Program

Dear Ms. Ziegler,

On May 3, 2016, you wrote to the Turlock Unified School District indicating that its School Chaplain Program violates the First Amendment Establishment Clause. By email exchange dated May 24, 2016, we agreed that the District would respond by June 10, 2016. Please consider this letter the District's response to your concerns and its proposed plan regarding how to modify the Program to ensure its constitutionality.

Factual Background

Turlock Chaplaincy, Inc. is a private non-profit organization that focuses on providing spiritual and emotional support following crisis or trauma for first responders such as firefighters and police officers as well as other Turlock community members. Turlock Chaplaincy, Inc. also provides volunteers to support students at Turlock Unified School District's elementary schools. The School Chaplain program has been in existence in the District from July 1, 2014 to the present. The District incurs no costs with respect to the Program since Rotary International and Kiwanis have donated funds for expenses related to the School Chaplain program.

School Chaplains come onto campus dressed in orange polo shirts with the phrase "School Chaplain" on the upper right hand side of their shirts. School Chaplains interact and mentor students in a group setting during lunch periods up to four days a week in order to help students with conflict resolution (i.e., conflicts on the playground) and with problem solving. In addition, School Chaplains may occasionally provide one-on-one mentoring to students who are going through a difficult time in their lives.

There are currently 28 School Chaplains that volunteer at eight (8) of the District's elementary schools. Each of the 28 School Chaplains volunteer at one of the District's school sites approximately 1-2 days per week. The volunteer schedule varies at the different school sites based on volunteer availability and site specific needs. As volunteers, School Chaplains are fingerprinted and must pass a background check prior to working with students.

Members of the School Chaplain program are volunteers (some clergy/some non-clergy) from the community. Currently, the 28 Chaplains include: retired school staff, retired counselors, retired school administrators, a retired pharmacist, a retired college professor, local business owners and Rotarians. A particular religious affiliation is not required of participants in the School Chaplain program; everyone is considered to participate in the School Chaplain program.

Although students refer to the volunteers as "Chaplains," when School Chaplains meet with students they do not proselytize, give students a religious message, or initiate prayer with students. Currently, neither students nor parents have been provided with written notice of the Program.

Turlock Chaplains, Inc. requires that volunteers receive training in Critical Incident Stress Management ("CISM"), a secular training program. School Chaplains also participate in secular based District sponsored training programs, including Youth Mental Health & First Aid training, Suicide Prevention Training, Trauma Informed Strategies, and similar non-faith based trainings offered to other District staff. In addition, as part of the District's Positive Behavior and Intervention Supports (PBIS) training, School Chaplains have participated in training provided by Viviana Barajas, an independent contractor, who is certified in the "Nurtured Heart Approach." This secular program provides techniques for responding to inappropriate behavior from students and is not a faith-based model.

Program Changes

From the District's perspective, the name of the program (School Chaplains), the use of a religious term ("Chaplain") on the shirts of the volunteers, and students referring to the volunteers as "Chaplains," risk the potential of creating the appearance that the program is of a religious nature. To address this potential issue, the Superintendent met with leadership of Turlock Chaplaincy, Inc. and requested program changes. As a result of these conversations, commencing with the upcoming school year, the name of the Program is being changed from the "School Chaplains" program to the "Character Coach" program. In lieu of the phrase "School Chaplain" on each volunteer's shirt, the term will be "Character Coach." Students will be requested to refer to the volunteers as "Coach" instead of "Chaplain."

In addition to these changes, the District will be adopting a Religion in the Schools policy that will clarify the District's need to remain neutral with respect to religion and, to the extent practical, will communicate that policy to staff and the community. Finally, notice of the Character Coaches program will be annually provided to parents and students.

Conclusion

Turlock is a highly diverse community with a strong history of community engagement and volunteerism and the work of volunteers on school campuses is appreciated by the District and its governing board. Nonetheless, the District recognizes its responsibility to ensure the constitutionality of its programs and to refrain from endorsing or promoting religion.

The District values the Foundation's willingness to engage in a constructive conversation about how best to ensure a vital volunteer program while simultaneously keeping religion separate from school. As a public agency, the District also appreciates the Foundation's willingness to bring this issue to administration's attention and we hope that the proposed changes alleviate your concerns.

If you feel any additional steps are needed or desire any further information from the District, please let us know. We look forward to hearing from you.

Very truly yours,



Dana Salles Trevethan,
Superintendent