

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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November 28, 2018

SENT BY MAIL & EMAIL TO:
MoranC@whitehouseisd.org

Dr. Christopher Moran
Superintendent
Whitehouse Independent School District
106 Wildcat Drive
Whitehouse, TX 75791

Re: Unconstitutional religious promotion by district

Dear Superintendent Moran:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation to alert you to community concerns over religious promotion within Whitehouse Independent School District. We appreciate your time and attention to addressing the following issue.

We were contacted by a concerned district community member who reported that Whitehouse ISD recently recorded and posted to its website a video promoting “faith” as part of the district’s “Mission and Beliefs.” The video, which appears on the district’s homepage, depicts various district staff members repeating the phrase: “We believe faith and family are the foundation of our community.” At the end of this portion of the video the district included a shot of a student writing on a whiteboard with the phrase “Solomon asked God...” appearing twice. The message appears to be that the district is willing to incorporate religious teachings into the classroom. Two images from the video are enclosed.

We write to request that the district remove endorsements of “faith” or religious teachings from its “Whitehouse ISD Mission and Beliefs” video and cease promoting a message that emphasizes religion in any future promotional materials.

As you are aware, it is well settled that public schools may not advance, prefer, or promote religion. *See, e.g., 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). Endorsing religion is exactly what Whitehouse ISD has done by adopting and advertising the core belief that faith is a “foundation of our community.”

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 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 Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309–310 (2000) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring)). A school-sponsored message that endorses “faith” conflicts with the personal nonreligious

worldviews of many district students and families, including the 38% of Americans born after 1987 who identify as nonreligious.¹ There is simply no reason for the district to ostracize this significant, growing portion of the community.

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 Cty.*, 484 F.3d 689 (4th Cir. 2007) (ruling that a teacher may be barred from displaying religious messages on classroom bulletin boards); *Washegesic v. Bloomington Pub. Schs.*, 33 F. 3d 679 (6th Cir. 1994) (ruling that a painting of Jesus may not be displayed in a public school). These restrictions extend to the official district website and other promotional materials. As with religious messages and iconography displayed on school walls, any reasonable viewer would perceive the district's video, posted on its official homepage, as representing the views of the district.

Individual families, teachers, and students are free, of course, to choose to rely on faith as a guiding principle in their personal lives. But when acting on behalf of the district, administrators cannot promote faith as a core value. This violates the principle that “the preservation and transmission of religious beliefs and worship is a responsibility and a choice committed to the private sphere.” *Santa Fe*, 530 U.S. at 310 (quoting *Lee*, 505 U.S. at 589). In short, “[f]amilies entrust public schools with the education of their students, 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, 583–84 (1987).

To avoid further Establishment Clause concerns, Whitehouse ISD must stop promoting “faith” as one of the district's core values. We ask that the district's “Mission and Beliefs” video be altered to be inclusive of *all* district students and families, including those who choose to be nonreligious. Please inform us in writing of the steps the district takes so that we may notify our complainant.

Sincerely,



Sam Grover
Associate Counsel

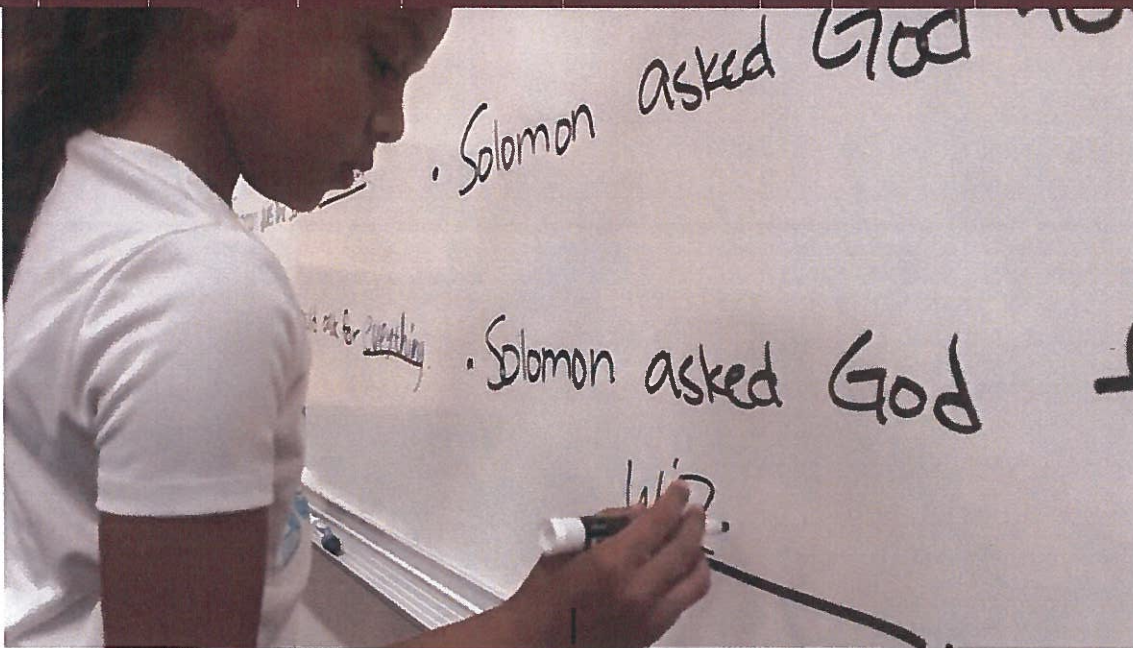
¹ Robert P. Jones & Daniel Cox, *America's Changing Religious Identity*, PUBLIC RELIGION RESEARCH INSTITUTE (Sept. 6, 2017), available at www.prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf.



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Faith

Family

