

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

February 28, 2019

SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL
superintendent@greenvilleisd.com

Dr. Demetrus Liggins
Superintendent
Greenville Independent School District
4004 Moulton Street
Greenville, TX 75401

Re: Unconstitutional district promotion of religious activities

Dear Superintendent Liggins:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation to alert you to unconstitutional religious promotion by employees of Greenville Independent School District. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 31,000 members across the country, including over 1,300 members in Texas. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

FFRF has been alerted that two Greenville ISD employees are featured in a recently released video advertisement for the evangelical religious group that runs “Men of Honor” and “Ladies of Honor,” which appears to be actively running meetings for both groups within the district. The website for the group, HonorMinistries.org, uses the tagline “World Changers for Christ” and identifies the organization’s mission: “to develop passionate followers of Jesus Christ.”

The video¹ first depicts the head of the organization, Mr. Tony Rorie, boasting that the group has “seen 400 students give their hearts to Christ on the public school campus.” Next, Chief School Leadership Officer Chip Gregory, who is identified in the video as “Head of Schools, Greenville ISD” appears and endorses the religious group: “I really feel strongly that [Men and Ladies of Honor] is going to be a game changer. And I know for a fact that Men’s [sic] and Ladies of Honor is going to change the dynamics of Greenville Independent School District.” Greenville Middle School Principal Dale Mason then appears and similarly endorses the group. He says in part, “I want [the students] to know ... that there is honor in being righteous....” The video shows Principal Mason interacting with students at Men of Honor and Ladies of Honor meetings.

While a school or district may permissibly adopt a policy that allows for private groups to meet on school property outside of instructional time, the district runs afoul of the Constitution if it allows its employees to organize or run religious events while acting in their official capacities, or allows

¹ Video available at <https://www.facebook.com/tony.rorie/videos/10218387645348586/>. Mr. Gregory first appears at the 0:48 mark.

employees to advertise religious groups to students. We write to ensure that the district ends all such unconstitutional practices and brings the Men and Ladies of Honor groups into compliance.

It is a well-settled constitutional principle that public schools may not endorse 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 Twp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962). The district may not allow its employees to use their official positions to advertise religious groups to students, or to participate in religious meetings at school while acting in their official capacities. Courts recognize that “the preservation and transmission of religious beliefs and worship is a responsibility and a choice committed to the private sphere.” *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 310 (2000) (quoting *Lee*, 505 U.S. at 589). When district staff organize, lead, or promote a religious group’s meetings, they violate the constitutional rights of students and their parents.

Mr. Gregory and Principal Mason have made clear to students that Men and Ladies of Honor is “stamped with [their] school’s seal of approval.” *Santa Fe* at 307. Based on both the video and district employees’ participation in these religious meetings, students and parents will inevitably conclude that the district impermissibly endorses religion over nonreligion, and specifically Christianity over all other faiths. “School 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.’” *Id.* at 309–10.

Schoolchildren already feel significant pressure to conform from their peers. They must not be subjected to similar pressure from district employees, especially on religious questions. The district must ensure that the video in question is taken down and that Mr. Gregory and Principal Mason refrain from endorsing or participating in religious activities while acting on behalf of the district in the future.

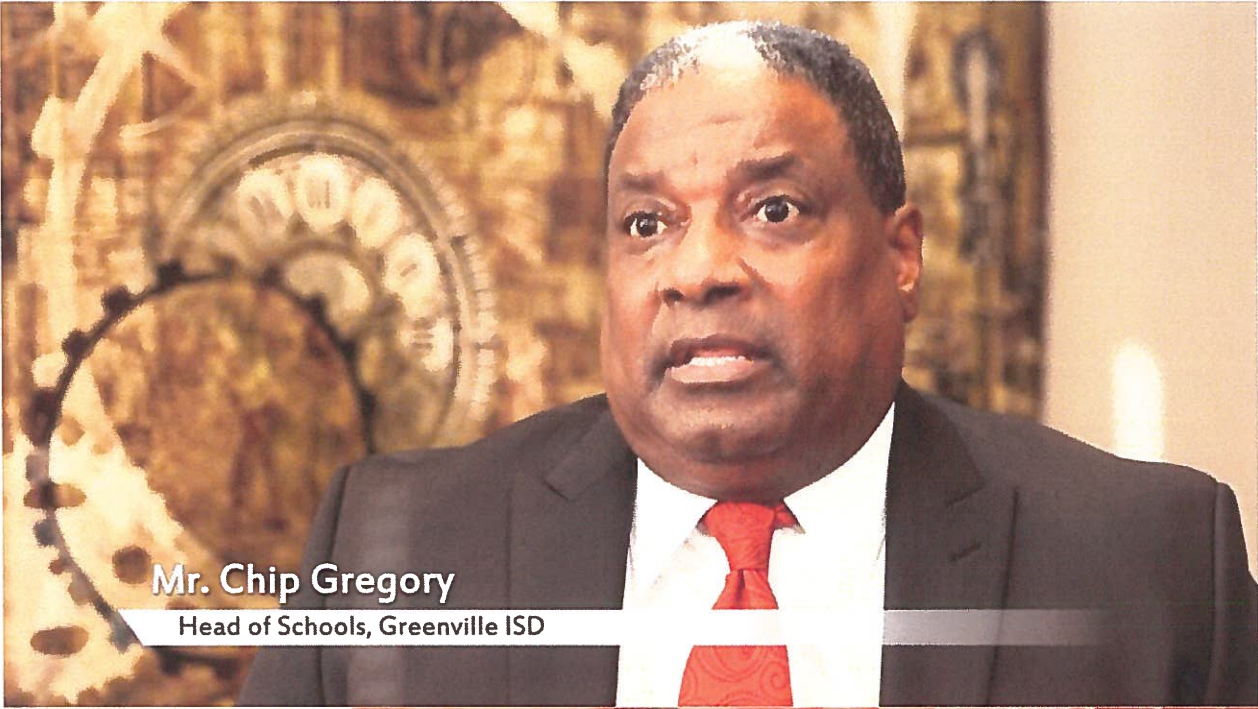
Additionally, district staff must be reminded that school-sponsored religious activity violates the Constitution as well as the rights of conscience of students and their parents, who have the right to direct the religious or non-religious upbringing of their children. The district should investigate the extent to which the Men and Ladies of Honor meetings on district property are being organized, led, or supported by district employees. All district involvement in these meetings must cease immediately. Please inform us in writing of the steps the district takes to address these constitutional violations so that we may notify our complainant.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Grover', written in a cursive style.

Sam Grover
Associate Counsel

Enclosures (two images from video advertisement)



Mr. Chip Gregory
Head of Schools, Greenville ISD

