

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

May 10, 2021

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: dreese@catoosa.k12.ga.us

Denia Reese
Superintendent
Catoosa County Public Schools
307 Cleveland Street
Ringgold, GA 30736

Re: Unconstitutional Bible Distribution and Church Recruitment

Dear Superintendent Reese:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation that occurred in Catoosa County Public Schools. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 35,000 members across the country, including more than 500 members in and a local chapter in Georgia. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

It was brought to our attention that Graysville Elementary School gave students backpacks containing bibles and other religious materials. A concerned local resident reported that children came home from school with a bible, a list of local Baptist churches, and a note asking them to “visit them and become part of the Catoosa Baptist Association family.” The list also included a religious message:

- A- ADMIT THAT YOU HAVE SINNED - ROMANS 3:23
- B- BELIEVE THAT JESUS DIED AND ROSE AGAIN TO FORGIVE YOUR SINS - ROMANS 5:8
- C - CONFESS YOUR SIN TO JESUS AND ACCEPT THE GIFT OF SALVATION - ROMANS 10:9-10

It is our understanding that the District is aware of this issue. We write to remind the District that distributing bibles, religious messages, and church recruiting materials to students is a violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment and to request an assurance that the District will be more cautious in the future. The District must ensure that any donations it is passing on to students from local churches do not contain bibles, recruitment materials, or promotions of religion or specific churches.

Courts have held that the distribution of bibles to students at public schools during instructional time is prohibited. *See Roark v. South Iron R-1 Sch. Dist.*, 573 F.3d 556 (8th Cir. 2009)

(permanently enjoining distribution of bibles to school children on school property); *Berger v. Rensselaer Cent. Sch. Corp.*, 982 F.2d 1160 (7th Cir. 1993) (holding that classroom distribution of bibles to fifth-graders violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution); *see also Tudor v. Bd. of Educ. of Rutherford*, 14 N.J. 31 (1953), *cert. denied*, 348 U.S. 816 (1954) (finding unconstitutional a school board resolution permitting the distribution of bibles to students).

Public schools have a constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion and to protect the rights of conscience of young and impressionable students. When a school distributes religious literature to its students, or permits evangelists to distribute religious literature to its students, it entangles itself with that religious message. Bible distributions alienate the 24% of Americans, including 38% of young adults, who identify as nonreligious.¹

Catoosa County Public Schools may not allow churches or religious groups to distribute bibles or religious materials to its students. We request that teachers and administrators receive additional training to ensure that the constitutional rights of families are protected. Please inform us in writing at your earliest convenience of the steps you are taking to remedy this serious constitutional violation so that we may assure our complainant that the violation will not recur.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Line". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Christopher Line
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

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