

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

November 10, 2022

SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL: kstaley@chicousd.org

Kelly Staley
Superintendent
Chico Unified School District
1163 East Seventh Street
Chico, CA 95928

Re: Unconstitutional Religious Display

Dear Superintendent Staley:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional concern in Pleasant Valley High School. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 38,000 members across the country, including more than 5,000 members and two local chapters in California. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

A concerned parent has reported that Pleasant Valley High School is displaying a mural that says, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." Please see the enclosed photo.

We ask that this mural be removed in order to respect the rights of all Pleasant Valley High School students.

The District violates the Constitution when it allows its schools to display religious symbols or messages. It is well settled that public schools may not show favoritism towards or coerce belief or participation in religion. *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2000); *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); *McCullum v. Bd. of Ed.*, 333 U.S. 203 (1948) This display violates this basic constitutional prohibition by creating the appearance that the District prefers religion over nonreligion and Christianity over all other faiths.

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 County*, 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 picture of Jesus may not be displayed in a public school).

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 members of the audience who are 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*, at 309 (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring)).

Additionally, this religious display needlessly alienates those students and teachers who are a part of the nearly thirty-seven percent of Americans who are non-Christians, and the nearly one in three Americans who now identify as religiously unaffiliated.¹

In recognition of the District’s constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion, please remove the mural as soon as is practicable. Please reply in writing with the steps you are taking to remedy this constitutional violation.

Sincerely,



Christopher Line
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure

¹ Gregory A. Smith, About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated, Pew Research Center (Dec. 14, 2021), available at www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/.

