

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: anthony.smith@clayton.k12.ga.us

Anthony Smith
Interim Superintendent
Clayton County Public Schools
1058 Fifth Avenue
Jonesboro, GA 30236

Re: Concerns over Religious Speaker

Dear Superintendent Smith:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding concerns over a religious speaker who recently preached to students at Jonesboro High School. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with currently more than 39,000 members, including more than 600 members and a local chapter in Georgia. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

It was recently brought to our attention that on January 5, 2023, Victoria Rose Waldrip, who goes by “Woah Vicky” in online videos, preached to students at Jonesboro High School. It is our understanding that at a girls basketball practice at the school, Frances Miller invited Ms. Waldrip to preach to students. We are not aware of how Ms. Miller is connected to the school or the district. We understand that the administration may not have been aware that this was going to occur.

Ms. Waldrip preached to the students about Jesus and salvation, and promoted her church while on school property as part of a school-sponsored activity. Ms. Waldrip talked to the girls about saving themselves for marriage and made disparaging remarks about LGBT people. In a video she posted of her talk, one of the girls asked Ms. Waldrip if being gay was bad.¹ She told the students that she isn’t god so she couldn’t tell gay students whether they were going to hell or not. Another student brought up gay preachers, and Vicky implied that there aren’t gay preachers. She then said, “I don’t know if I should say this or not” before telling students that people turn gay after being molested as children. She also said that being gay is a sin and is no different than killing someone or having sex outside of marriage. She then brought up Jeffery Dahmer, and expressed joy that he had found God in prison and was likely in heaven now, and that “God really uses the people you would never expect.”

We don’t know who was involved in bringing in this religious speaker, other than Ms. Miller, but we understand that several of the students involved in this incident have expressed their outrage

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aq6f4utmvxY>

that it was allowed to occur. We ask that the District immediately investigate this incident and provide an assurance that outside adults will not be allowed to preach hate and bigotry to students during school-sponsored activities again in the future. If any school employees or administrators were involved, they should be reprimanded and reminded of their obligations as public school employees.

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). Allowing a religious speaker like Ms. Waldrip even one-time access to preach to students and attempt to convert them to her own religious viewpoints violates the Establishment Clause and students' rights to be free from indoctrination within their own public schools. On behalf of parents and students, FFRF has taken action against school systems for similar violations. *See Mays v. Cabell Cnty Bd. of Educ.*, No. 3:22-cv-00085 (S.D. W.Va., Filed Feb. 17, 2022).

The school allowing Ms. Waldrip's religious and hateful messaging at a school-sponsored activity demonstrates an unlawful preference for religion over non-religion and, specifically, Christianity over all other faiths. This talk sent the message that the District not only favors students and community members who are Christian, but that it specifically prefers those who subscribe to this particular brand of religious hate and bigotry. This needlessly alienates the Jonesboro High School students and families belonging to the 37% of Americans who are non-Christian, including the almost 30% who are nonreligious.²

Clayton County Public Schools must investigate this incident and take immediate disciplinary action against any employees found to have violated its policies. If the district has no policies that prevent outside adults from delivering hateful religious messages to students as part of school-sponsored activities, one should be adopted. The district should take all actions within its power to ensure that something like this cannot happen again in the future. Please inform us promptly in writing of the steps you are taking to protect the rights of conscience of all students and families within the district so that we may inform our complainants.

Sincerely,



Christopher Line
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

² 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/.