

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

October 19, 2021

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: GPISDsuptintendent@galenaparkisd.com

Dr. John Moore
Superintendent
Galena Park Independent School District
14705 Woodforest Blvd.
Houston, TX 77015

Re: Operation Christmas Child

Dear Superintendent Moore:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional concern in Galena Park ISD. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 36,000 members across the country, including more than 1,500 members and a local chapter 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.

A concerned District community member has reported that North Shore Elementary recently participated in a fundraiser for “Operation Christmas Child,” a charity project sponsored by Samaritan’s Purse, which describes the program as a “shoebox ministry.” This religious ministry project is also being promoted on the school’s Facebook page, and official website. Please see the enclosed screenshots.

Operation Christmas Child is a charity project sponsored by Samaritan’s Purse. Samaritan’s Purse is a pervasively sectarian religious organization. According to Samaritan’s Purse’s website, the organization does their

“utmost to follow Christ’s command by going to the aid of the world’s poor, sick, and suffering. We are an effective means of reaching hurting people in countries around the world with food, medicine, and other assistance in the Name of Jesus Christ. This, in turn, earns us a hearing for the Gospel, the Good News of eternal life through Jesus Christ.”¹

The website also describes that the purpose of the shoe boxes is to attract children in the developing world to convert to Christianity.² Organizing a donation drive that for all intents and purposes employs school staff and resources to convert people to Christianity violates basic constitutional principles. It is inappropriate for public school teachers to use their authority to encourage students to donate to religious groups.

¹ <https://www.samaritanspurse.org/our-ministry/about-us/>.

² <https://www.samaritanspurse.org/operation-christmas-child/eternal-impact/>.

We write to request that the District prevent any further use of its time, resources, and employees to support this evangelical organization's mission.

It is a fundamental principle of Establishment Clause jurisprudence that a public school may not advance, prefer or promote 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 Twshp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962). Organizing a donation drive that employs school staff and resources to collect donations and advance the mission of a religious ministry violates basic constitutional principles. It is inappropriate for public school teachers to use their authority to encourage students to donate to religious groups.

While it is laudable for a public school to promote student involvement in the community by volunteering and donating to charitable organizations, the school cannot use that goal as an avenue to fund a religious organization with a religious mission. Certainly, there are other secular non-profit organizations that offer charitable opportunities.

Finally, it is no defense to say that participation in this donation drive is voluntary. Courts have summarily rejected arguments that voluntariness excuses a constitutional violation. *See Weisman*, 505 U.S. at 596 ("It is a tenet of the First Amendment that the State cannot require one of its citizens to forfeit his or her rights and benefits as the price of resisting conformance to state-sponsored religious practice."); *Schempp*, 374 U.S. at 288 (Brennan, J., concurring) ("[T]he availability of excusal or exemption simply has no relevance to the establishment question . . ."). As the Supreme Court wrote in *Schempp*, offending religious practices are not "mitigated by the fact that individual students may absent themselves upon parental request, for that fact furnishes no defense to a claim of unconstitutionality under the Establishment Clause." 374 U.S. at 224-25.

We request that the District refrain from all future promotion and coordination of Operation Christmas Child drives and prevent its employees from using their positions to do so. Please inform us in writing of the steps you are taking to protect the right of conscience of your non-Christian and nonreligious students, parents, and teachers and to ensure that this type of violation does not occur in the future.

Sincerely,



Christopher Line
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

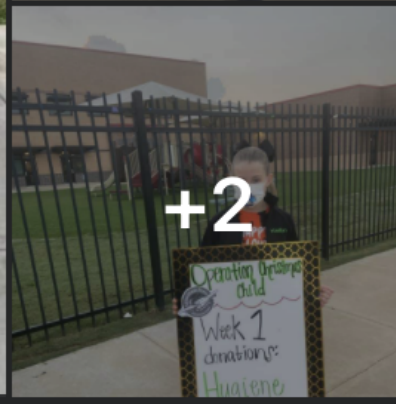
Enclosures



Galena Park ISD

September 24 at 1:28 PM · 🌐

Operation Christmas Child at North Shore Elementary has begun!
[#GalenaParkISDExcellence](#)





OPERATION CHRISTMAS CHILD

WEEK 3

(Oct 4th-Oct 8th)

**Stationary
Items**



School Bus

Operation Christmas Child: 17
Week 3

NSE is taking weekly donations for Operation Christmas Child. Students will help pack shoebox gifts to bless children in need around the world.

**RED LIGHT MEANS
STOP!**

