

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: tmay@garfieldre2.net, bfletchall@garfieldre2.net, jshoup@garfieldre2.net, cmaness@garfieldre2.net, devridge@garfieldre2.net

Tony May
President
Garfield Re-2 School Board
839 Whiteriver Ave
Rifle, CO 81650

Re: Christian nationalist social studies standards

Dear President May and School Board members:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to urge you not to adopt the Christian-based “American Birthright” curriculum that is currently under consideration by the Board. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including more than 1,300 members and two local chapters in Colorado. 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 Garfield Re-2 parent has reported that the Board is considering switching the District’s current social studies curriculum to a conservative, Christian-based curriculum created by the Civics Alliance called “American Birthright.”¹ American Birthright’s standards “focus on Western civilization and American exceptionalism and highlight patriotism and Christianity — and have drawn sharp criticism from teachers and national social studies groups.”² Christopher Martell, a social studies education professor at the University of Massachusetts-Boston, has raised concerns about the curriculum because it has “a clear undertone” suggesting “that the U.S. is a Christian nation founded on Christian values and beliefs” which is exemplified by passages calling for curricula to emphasize “the role of faith in sustaining and extending liberty” and describing America’s founding principles as “rooted in Christian thought.”³

In 2022, the Colorado State Board of Education voted against adopting the American Birthright standards for the state with one member declaring “[t]hese standards are too extreme for the state of Colorado.”⁴

¹<https://www.postindependent.com/news/garfield-re-2-school-district-board-president-tony-may-pitches-switch-to-conservative-christian-based-social-studies-curriculum/>

²<https://districtadministration.com/social-studies-revision-roils-board-of-education-with-proposal-to-use-conservative-american-birthright-standards/>

³<https://www.salon.com/2022/07/08/rights-new-social-studies-plan-vows-to-fight-crt-wokeness-and-the-overthrow-of-america/>

⁴ <https://www.cpr.org/2022/10/12/colorado-board-of-education-american-birthright-social-studies/>

The National Council for the Social Studies, the largest professional organization devoted exclusively to the teaching and learning of social studies, which represents over 10,000 social studies educators, determined in 2022 that “the suggested social studies standards developed by the Civics Alliance do not align with best practices related to the development of social studies standards.”⁵ They further determined that “[i]f implemented in schools, these suggested standards would have damaging and lasting effects on the civic knowledge of students and their capacity to engage in civic reasoning and deliberation.”⁶ NCSS does not endorse nor support the use of these standards. NCSS elaborated:

Our position has remained consistent over the years that the standards that organizations, states, districts, and/or schools and teachers develop or adopt should be grounded in current scholarship, reflect best practices in social studies education, and be inclusive for all student backgrounds and ability levels. Although the Civics Alliance claims that its standards align with these expectations, they do not. Rather, we view these suggested standards as an attempt to return to a time when United States social studies classrooms presented a single narrative of U.S. and Western history that glorified selected aspects of history while minimizing the experiences, contributions, and perspectives of Indigenous peoples, people of color, women, the LGBTQIA+ community, the working class, and countless others. The writers of the suggested standards use outdated language, have a clear political motive, and promote content and approaches to social studies and history education that do not align with those recommended by experts in social studies content areas.

When viewing the standards themselves, the Christian bias is immediately evident. The civics standards direct that there should be an “emphasis on the equal dignity of all individual humans in the eyes of God,” and make repeated references to “Christian liberty”⁷:

Explore the Hebrew, Greek, and Roman sources of the American political system, and the Christian synthesis of Hebrew, Greek, and Roman thought, with its emphasis on the equal dignity of all individual humans in the eyes of God... The early modern English inheritance and documents of Christian liberty, republicanism, militia, accountable government, mixed government, parliamentary sovereignty, limited government, freedom of the press, the English Bill of Rights, and the Toleration Act. The colonial American inheritance and documents of Christian liberty, self-government, and local government. Discuss the Enlightenment theories of Locke, Montesquieu, and their contemporaries that universalized the traditions of Christian and English liberty.

⁵<https://www.socialstudies.org/current-events-response/ncss-statement-american-birthright-civics-alliances-model-k-12-social>

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ https://civicsalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/American-Birthright_Introduction.pdf

Social Studies standards that falsely teach that Christian history and Christian traditions are inherently American and/or that religion makes up the fabric of ethics and morality under the guise of secular history and moral philosophy blatantly promotes Christianity and violates the rights of District students and parents.

It is erroneous to assert that our nation was founded on Christian values. The concept of “Judeo-Christian values” did not even exist until the mid 20th Century, let alone at the time the United States was founded.⁸ To the contrary, the United States was founded by Enlightenment-inspired thinkers who valued reason and skepticism. If the Framers had wanted to establish the United States based on religious principles, they would have said so in the Constitution, the founding document of our nation. Instead they did the opposite. Our Founders made our country the first among nations to adopt a godless and entirely secular Constitution, one whose only references to religion are exclusionary (e.g., Article VI’s prohibition of any religious test as a qualification for public office).⁹

In reality, many of the Founders were particularly wary of forming a country that commingled religion with government. That is why they drafted a Constitution that effectively formed “a wall of separation between church and state.” This is perfectly exemplified in George Washington’s response to a letter from Presbyterian Ministers in Massachusetts and New Hampshire expressing their disappointment in the absence of “some Explicit acknowledgement of the only true God and Jesus Christ” in the Constitution. Washington replied “that the path of true piety is so plain as to require but little political direction. To this consideration we ought to ascribe the absence of any regulation, respecting religion, from the [Constitution] of our country.”¹⁰

In 1797, our country famously signed a treaty with Tripoli declaring that the “government of the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion.” This treaty—drafted during George Washington’s presidency, approved unanimously by the Senate, and signed by John Adams—is a reminder that the Founders explicitly held the United States to be a government that separated state from church. It is pure misinformation to suggest that our nation is founded on Christian values. As elected officials, the Board should strive to promote an accurate understanding of United States history that respects the foundational principles of the Constitution’s First Amendment.

We ask that the Board reject the adoption of the American Birthright standards and uphold their duty to provide standards that are grounded in current scholarship, reflect best practices in social studies education, and that are inclusive for all student backgrounds and ability levels, as recommended by experts like the National Council for the Social Studies.

Public schools have a duty to ensure that instructional materials do not promote a particular religious viewpoint. “[T]he discretion of the States and local school boards in matters of education must be exercised in a manner that comports with the transcendent imperatives of the

⁸ James Loeffler, *The Problem with the “Judeo-Christian Tradition,”* THE ATLANTIC (Aug. 1, 2020), <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/08/the-judeo-christian-tradition-is-over/614812/>.

⁹ U.S. CONST. art. VI, § 3.

¹⁰ Letter from George Washington to Presbyterian Ministers of Massachusetts and New Hampshire (Nov. 2, 1789).

First Amendment.” *Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 U.S. 578, 583 (1987) (finding unconstitutional a statute allowing the teaching of creationism, a religious belief, in classrooms). The Supreme Court in *Edwards* recognized that “[f]amilies entrust public schools with the education of their children, but condition their trust on the understanding that the classroom will not purposely be used to advance religious views that may conflict with the private beliefs of the student and his or her family.” *Id.* at 584.

Just as federal courts have routinely ruled that creationist instruction in schools is unconstitutional, religious indoctrination presented as history is likewise unconstitutional. See *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97 (1968); *Freiler v. Tangipahoa Parish Bd. of Educ.*, 201 F.3d 602 (5th Cir. 2000); *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area Sch. Dist.*, 400 F. Supp. 2d 707 (M.D. Pa 2005) (holding that a policy requiring students to hear a statement that intelligent design is alternative to Darwin’s theory of evolution violates the Establishment Clause). Instruction should be based on accepted standards within the academic community. Educational materials should not inaccurately endorse a Christian worldview. The proposed standards create an opportunity and in some cases a mandate for teachers to violate the Establishment Clause by advancing or promoting religious views rather than focusing on historical events.

Our complainant, and many other District parents, are gravely concerned about their children being indoctrinated in Christian nationalism if these inaccurate and biased standards are adopted. As Baptist Joint Committee President Amanda Tyler explains in a joint report published by FFRF: “Christian nationalism is a political ideology and cultural framework that seeks to merge American and Christian identities, distorting both the Christian faith and America’s constitutional democracy. Christian nationalism relies on the mythological founding of the United States as a ‘Christian nation,’ singled out for God’s providence in order to fulfill God’s purposes on earth. Christian nationalism demands a privileged place for Christianity in public life, buttressed by the active support of government at all levels.”¹¹

State education exists to cultivate the minds of young students and promote independent thinking—in short, to educate, not to indoctrinate. The District is a public entity and must make its decisions based on truth, accuracy, and expertise, not on political or religious ideology. It should not be misleading and miseducating students regarding the nation’s legal and founding history. We urge the District to consult with unbiased experts if it wishes to alter its social studies standards in order to provide an accurate and secular understanding of the country’s history as the Constitution protects.

Teaching students false, biased information about American history particularly stigmatizes and alienates non-religious students. About a third of U.S. teens (32 percent) say they are religiously unaffiliated, including 6 percent who describe themselves as atheists, 4 percent who are agnostics and 23 percent who say their religion is “nothing in particular.”¹² Non-religious Americans are

¹¹ Christian Nationalism and the January 6, 2021 Insurrection, published by the Baptist Joint Committee and the Freedom From Religion Foundation, February 2022, Introduction by Amanda Tyler

https://bjconline.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Christian_Nationalism_and_the_Jan6_Insurrection-2-9-22.pdf

¹² *Religious affiliation among American adolescents* Pew Research Center (Sep. 10, 2020), available at www.pewresearch.org/religion/2020/09/10/religious-affiliation-among-american-adolescents/.

the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification — 35 percent of Americans are non-Christians, and this includes the more than three-in-ten adult Americans (29 percent) who are now religiously unaffiliated.¹³ A recent study found that 49 percent of Generation Z are religiously unaffiliated.¹⁴

In order to provide District students with accurate information, it is necessary that the Board reject the American Birthright standards and ensure all District education standards are based on truth, accuracy, and expertise.

Sincerely,

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

Christopher Line
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

¹³ *About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults are Now Religiously Unaffiliated* Pew Research Center (Dec. 14, 2021), available at www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/.

¹⁴ 2022 Cooperative Election Study of 60,000 respondents, analyzed by Ryan P. Burge www.religioninpublic.blog/2023/04/03/gen-z-and-religion-in-2022/.