

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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July 26, 2019

**SENT VIA U.S. MAIL & EMAIL:**

touchardp@gcsd.us

Ms. Pam Touchard  
Superintendent of Education  
George County School District  
5152 Main Street  
Lucedale, MS 39452

RE: Unconstitutional religious displays on district property

Dear Superintendent Touchard:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to alert you to unconstitutional religious displays on George County School District property. As you may recall from our 2018 letter, FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with the purposes to protect the constitutional separation between church and state and to educate the public on matters related to nontheism. We currently have more than 31,000 members across the country, including many members in Mississippi.

A concerned district community member recently contacted FFRF to report that signs displaying a Christian cross have appeared on several district properties. The signs feature a large cross next to the words “passion, purpose, pride” with “#gcstrong” and “George County Rebels” underneath. We understand that these signs are currently displayed at Agricola Elementary, Benndale Elementary, LC Hatcher Elementary, Rocky Creek Elementary, George County Middle School, and the district’s Transportation Maintenance & Child Nutrition building. Please see the enclosed example images. We further understand that the “passion, purpose, pride” message is being adopted by the school district as a theme for the upcoming school year.

We write to ensure that the district ceases impermissibly endorsing Christianity through religious displays on school property. The signs must be removed.

It is well settled that public schools may not advance, prefer, or promote religion. *See 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). Displaying a Latin cross or other religious symbols on school property sends a message to students that the district endorses Christianity, ostracizing minority religious and nonreligious students. Such displays violate this well-established constitutional principle.

These signs communicate to a reasonable observer that the district endorses Christianity over nonreligion and all minority religions. “The Latin cross . . . is the principal symbol of

Christianity around the world, and display of the cross alone could not reasonably be taken to have any secular point.” *Capitol Square Review & Advisory Bd. v. Pinette*, 515 U.S. 753, 792 (1995) (Souter, J., concurring). An overwhelming majority of federal courts agree that the Latin cross universally represents the Christian religion. *See, e.g., Separation of Church and State Comm. v. City of Eugene*, 93 F.3d 617, 620 (9th Cir. 1996) (“There is no question that the Latin cross is a symbol of Christianity, and that its placement on public land . . . violates the Establishment Clause”); *Harris v. City of Zion*, 927 F.2d 1401, 1412 (7th Cir. 1991), *cert. denied*, 505 U.S. 1218 (1992) (“[A] Latin cross . . . endorses or promotes a particular religious faith. It expresses an unambiguous choice in favor of Christianity”).

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 Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309 (2000) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring)).

These religious displays alienate non-Christian and nonreligious students, parents, teachers, and members of the public whose beliefs are inconsistent with the message being promoted by the district. This consideration should hold substantial weight for the district, given that fully 47% of young Americans are non-Christian,<sup>1</sup> with 21% of those born after 1999—i.e., all of your current students—identifying as either atheist or agnostic.<sup>2</sup>

We ask that George County School District remove all signs promoting Christianity from its property out of respect for the constitutional rights of its minority religious and nonreligious students. Please respond in writing detailing the steps being taken to remedy this constitutional violation so that we may notify our complainant. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Sam Grover  
Associate Counsel

STG:dwh

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<sup>1</sup> Robert P. Jones & Daniel Cox, *America’s Changing Religious Identity*, Public Religion Research Institute (Sept. 6, 2017), available at [www.prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf](http://www.prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> *Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z*, The Barna Group (Jan. 24, 2018), [www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/](http://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/).







