

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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September 29, 2022

**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: [cwatts@gcpsk12.org](mailto:cwatts@gcpsk12.org)**

Dr. Calvin J. Watts  
Superintendent  
Gwinnett County Public Schools  
437 Old Peachtree Rd. NW  
Suwanee, GA 30024

Re: Unconstitutional Proselytizing by Teacher

Dear Superintendent Watts:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding an egregious constitutional violation occurring in Gwinnett County Public Schools. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 38,000 members across the country, including more than 600 members and a local chapter in Georgia. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

It is our understanding that Jenny Savoy, a reading enrichment teacher at Richards Middle School, has been using her position to attempt to convert students to Christianity and otherwise impose her personal religious beliefs onto students. We understand that Ms. Savoy organized and now runs a religious club at the school and regularly proselytizes to students.

On August 4, 2022, Ms. Savoy posted a photo on Facebook showing that she had added a religious quote to her “wall of quotes”: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. - Jesus Christ.” Please see the enclosed screenshot.

On August, 15, 2022, Ms. Savoy posted on Facebook that she had “finished reading and responding to [students] feeling’s journals.” She asked that her followers pray for her students and included a religious message she wrote in one of the student’s journals: “...You’re also a leader and being a leader can be a lonely place. I’m going to pray God will send you a friend who will encourage you. Please see the enclosed screenshots.

On September 11, 2022, Ms. Savoy explained in a Facebook post that the school’s principal allowed her to start a prayer group with students: “Thankful for an amazing principal who allowed me to start this. God is going to move in our school!” The post included a photo with hands clasped in prayer and the message “Richards’ Morning Prayer Mondays @ 8:00 AM. Let us pray.” Please see the enclosed screenshot.

On September 18, 2022, Ms. Savoy described in a Facebook post that she would be posting a religious message on her filing cabinet so that students will see that she is praying for them:

I love, love, LOVE my church! It is a breath of fresh air. They gave us these magnets today to put on our refrigerator and write a different name of someone we will pray for each day, by mine is going on my filing cabinet for my students to see their names on it.

Please see the enclosed screenshot.

On September 20, 2022, Ms. Savoy posted a long rant on Facebook describing in detail how she has been using the prayer club to proselytize to students:

Let me remind you how cool God is!!!

There is a girl in my class who I believe by the end of the year, will give her heart to Jesus. She claims to be agnostic. Last week I invited her to come to Surge (the before school Christian club) because I was speaking. She came! Not only that, she came again this week! We talked a while and I prayed for her. The Holy Spirit led me to share my story with her. I invited her to come to my classroom today during her lunch period (I don't have students at that time). She came and I shared what I was like at her age and how desperately I needed Jesus. She could relate to so much of my story.

If that wasn't cool enough for you... I took her to the faculty vending machine to get a snack. Every time she put the last two coins in, the machine would spit them back out. She must have tried 5 times. I tried 2 more. Then I put my hand on the machine and said, "Jesus, please make this machine accept our money." She laughed, but I also saw curiosity on her face. I said, "I'm serious. He will do this just to show you He's real. He cares about you." After I prayed, she put the coins in, and guess what happened! I wish you could have seen her eyes! She was utterly amazing.

I am so, so, so thankful for the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of students, and so thankful for a God who loves so extravagantly!

I can't give her name, but please pray for Jenny's 8th grader.

Please see the enclosed screenshot.

On September 29, 2022, Ms. Savoy posted an update: "I gave my '8th grader' a Bible and journal today. I can't wait to see what God does in her life. Keep praying for her please." Please see the enclosed screenshot.

We write to ask that the District take immediate action to ensure that Ms. Savoy is no longer attempting to convert students to Christianity, discussing her religious beliefs with students, proselytizing to students, sharing religious messages with students, giving bibles to students, or in any way imposing her religious beliefs onto students. Gwinnett County Public Schools must remove any religious messages posted for students to see. Ms. Savoy cannot be allowed to lead or participate in any religious clubs in the District, and must immediately cease her efforts to convert students. Given her egregious behavior, Ms. Savoy should be terminated, and administrators at the school should be reprimanded and reminded of their duties under the law. Ms. Savoy has demonstrated that she is not willing to put her students and her secular position as a teacher ahead of her desire to proselytize and push her personal religious beliefs.

Public schools have a constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion and to protect the rights of conscience of young and impressionable students. It is well settled that public schools may not show favoritism towards or coerce belief or participation in religion. *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). “It is beyond dispute that, at a minimum, the Constitution guarantees that government may not coerce anyone to support or participate in religion or its exercise.” *Lee*, at 587. When teachers use their position to promote their personal religious beliefs, it creates the impression in the minds of students and parents ““that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community.”” *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309 (2000).

The District has an obligation to ensure that its teachers are not using their positions to inculcate religion. Certainly, “a school can direct a teacher to ‘refrain from expressions of religious viewpoints in the classroom and like settings.’” *Helland v. S. Bend Comm. Sch. Corp.*, 93 F.3d 327 (7th Cir. 1993) (quoting *Bishop v. Arnov*, 926 F.2d 1066, 1077 (11th Cir. 1991)). The Supreme Court has 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.” *Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 U.S. 578, 584 (1987). Because the District and its administrators have turned a blind eye to Ms. Savoy’s overt proselytization, it has become complicit in an egregious constitutional violation and breach of trust.

Please note that it is not a violation of the free speech rights of teachers when a school district regulates what they teach to students while acting in their official capacities. Teachers have access to a captive audience of students due to their position as public educators. Therefore, the District has a duty to regulate religious proselytizing during the school day. “Because the speech at issue owes its existence to [his] position as a teacher, [the School District] acted well within constitutional limits in ordering [the teacher] not to speak in a manner it did not desire.” *Johnson v. Poway Unified Sch. Dist.*, 658 F.3d 954, 970 (9th Cir. 2011), *cert. denied*, 132 S. Ct. 1807 (2012) (upholding decision of school board to require a math teacher to remove two banners with historical quotes referencing “God”); *see also Garcetti v. Ceballos*, 547 U.S. 410, 421 (2006) (“We hold that when public employees make statements pursuant to their official duties, the

employees are not speaking as citizens for First Amendment purposes, and the Constitution does not insulate their communications from employer discipline.”). Courts have upheld the termination of teachers who violate the principle of separation between church and state. *See, e.g., Grossman v. S. Shore Pub. Sch. Dist.*, 507 F.3d 1097 (7th Cir. 2007) (upholding termination of guidance counselor who prayed with students).

The Equal Access Act, which allows religious student clubs to form, requires that “employees or agents of the school or government are present at religious meetings only in a nonparticipatory capacity.” 20 U.S.C. § 4071(c)(2). Students in secondary schools may organize religious clubs, but these must be entirely student-initiated and student-led and take place outside of school hours, unlike Ms. Savoy’s club, which she has admitted to starting. *See Bd. of Educ. of the Westside Cty. Sch. v. Mergens*, 496 U.S. 226, 253 (1990) (holding the Equal Access Act constitutional). The Supreme Court prohibits participation of public school staff and outsider involvement in the religious activities of students. “Under the [Equal Access] Act . . . faculty monitors may not participate in any religious meetings, and nonschool persons may not direct, control or regularly attend activities of student groups.” *Id.* at 253 (citing 20 U.S.C. §§ 4071(c)(3) and (5)). Any school religious clubs must be bona fide student clubs that are both student-initiated and student-run.

The District must make certain that none of its employees are unlawfully and inappropriately indoctrinating students in religious matters by discussing their personal religious beliefs, sharing religious messages with students, proselytizing to students, sharing bibles with students, or otherwise creating a religious environment in their classrooms. The prayer club Ms. Savoy has admitted to starting, organizing, and leading must be disbanded.

We ask that the District immediately investigate this situation and terminate Ms. Savoy’s employment if these accounts are confirmed. At a minimum, the District must ensure that Ms. Savoy fully complies with the Establishment Clause and stops violating the rights of her students. If Ms. Savoy is incapable of teaching without abusing her position to convert students to her personal religion, which appears to be the case, she must be terminated. The District should provide additional training to administrators and teachers at Richards Middle School regarding their constitutional obligations. Please respond in writing, confirming that this letter has been received and outlining the steps the District will take to resolve this serious constitutional violation so that we may notify our complainant.

Sincerely,



Christopher Line  
Staff Attorney  
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosures



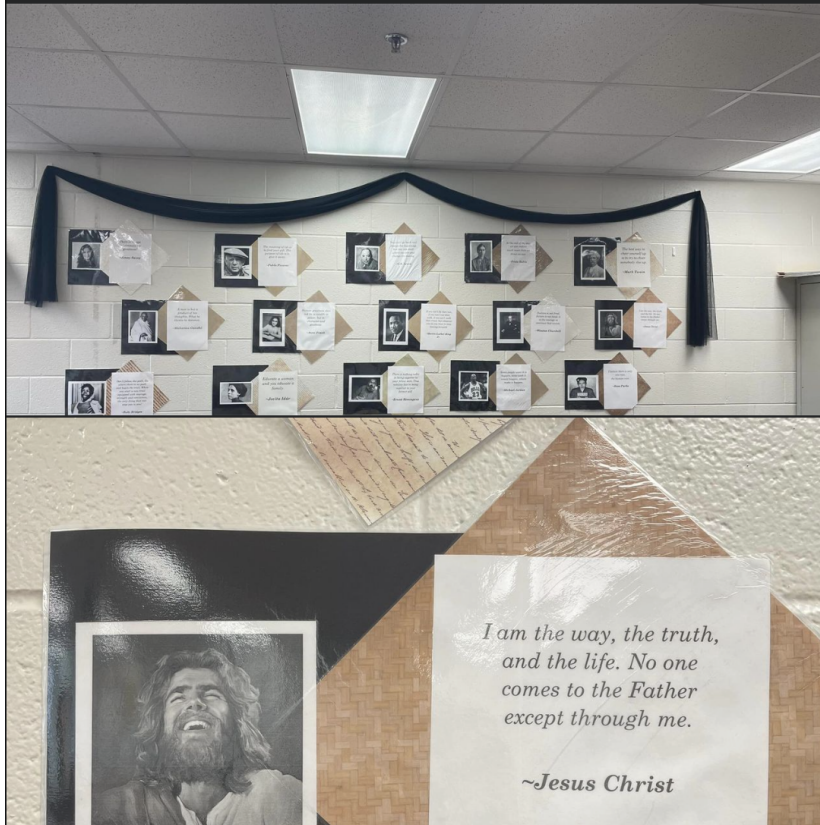


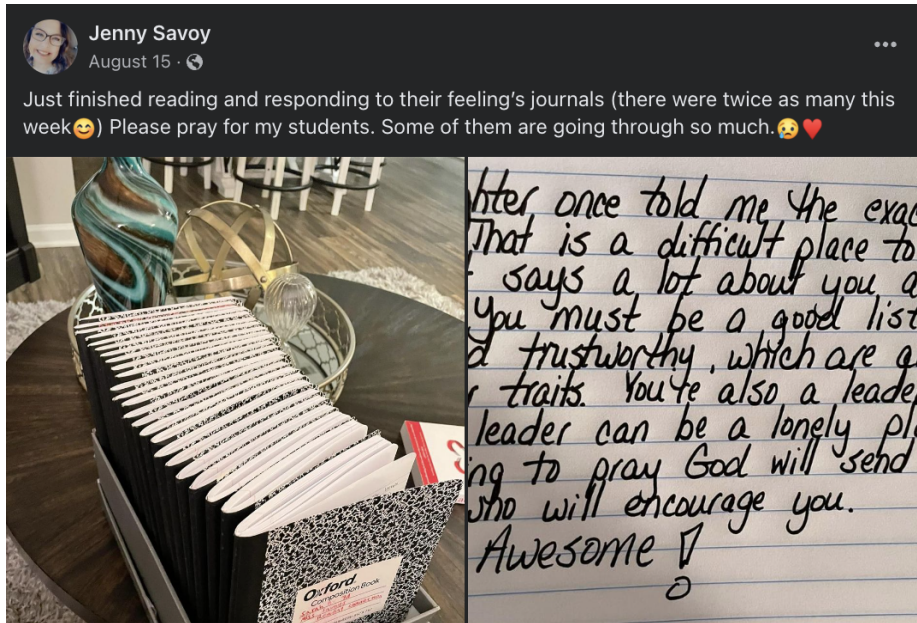
Jenny Savoy

August 4 · 🌐




I added someone to my wall of quotes. How could I have forgotten him?!






My daughter once told me the exact same thing. That is a difficult place to be in, and it says a lot about you as a friend. You must be a good listener, wise and trustworthy, which are all amazing character traits. You're also a leader and being a leader can be a lonely place. I'm going to pray God will send you a friend who will encourage you. You're Awesome! 🙏

 **Jenny Savoy**  
September 11 at 12:23 PM · 🌐

Thankful for an amazing principal who allowed me to start this. God is going to move in our school!



 **Jenny Savoy** is at **Twelve Stone Church**.  
September 18 at 2:22 PM · Lawrenceville, GA · 🌐

I love, love, LOVE my church! It is a breath of fresh air. They gave us these magnets today to put on our refrigerator and write a different name of someone we will pray for each day, but mine is going on my filing cabinet for my students to see their names on it. ❤️

Also, this is the teacher across the hall me I ran into today!





**Jenny Savoy**

September 20 at 8:40 PM · 🧑



Let me remind you how cool God is!!!

There is a girl in my class who I believe by the end of the year, will give her heart to Jesus. She claims to be agnostic. Last week I invited her to come to Surge (the before school Christian club) because I was speaking. She came! Not only that, she came again this week! We talked a while and I prayed for her. The Holy Spirit led me to share my story with her. I invited her to come to my classroom today during her lunch period (I don't have students at that time). She came and I shared what I was like at her age and how desperately I needed Jesus. She could relate to so much of my story.

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**Jenny Savoy**

14h · 🌐



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