

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

April 20, 2023

**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: [ratcliffjay@harletonisd.net](mailto:ratcliffjay@harletonisd.net)**

Jay Ratcliff  
Superintendent  
Harleton Independent School District  
17000 SH 154  
Harleton, TX 75651

Re: Unconstitutional religious promotion

Dear Superintendent Ratcliff:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation that occurred in Harleton ISD (“the District”). FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 40,000 members across the country, including more than 1,700 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 alumni and community member reported that on April 17, 2023 District staff and students celebrated the construction of a new archery building by burying a Christian bible where the building’s door will be erected. A post on the official Harleton ISD Facebook page states:

This afternoon a small group met together to thank God for the blessing of our new archery building. We buried a bible where the door will be. A concrete foundation will be poured in the morning but we wanted God’s Word to be part of the building foundation. Great things are happening in the Harleton Archery program!

Please see the enclosed screenshot of the post.

Our complainant further expressed concerns that the District has a pattern and practice of promoting religion, specifically Christianity.

We write to request that the District refrain from promoting religion on its official social media pages. Additionally, if removing the buried bible is not feasible, we at least ask that in future the District ensure that official events, such as ceremonies celebrating new buildings, do not include religious rituals.

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). By promoting Christianity at an official District event and on its official Facebook page, the District demonstrates blatant favoritism towards religion over nonreligion, and Christianity above all other faiths. This “[s]chool sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible because it sends the

ancillary message to . . . 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*, at 309–10 (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring)). This needlessly alienates all District students, alumni, and community members who do not subscribe to Christianity, including those belonging to the nearly one in three Americans who now identify as religiously unaffiliated.<sup>1</sup>

Further, the Supreme Court has described the power of social media sites as “the principal sources for knowing current events, checking ads for employment, speaking and listening in the modern public square, and otherwise exploring the vast realms of human thought and knowledge.” *Packingham v. North Carolina*, 137 S. Ct. 1730, 1737 (2017) (internal citations omitted). School officials must be particularly diligent not to entangle religious beliefs with official announcements made in this “modern public square.”

The District must investigate this situation and ensure that official District social media pages are not used to promote religion and that all future official events do not include religious rituals. It’s the District’s constitutional obligation to remain neutral towards religion. Please respond in writing with the steps the District is taking to address this matter so that we may inform our complainant.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Samantha F. Lawrence". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Samantha F. Lawrence  
Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow  
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure

---

<sup>1</sup> 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/](http://www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/).



Harleton ISD

33m · 🌐



This afternoon a small group met together to thank God for the blessing of our new archery building. We buried a bible where the door will be. A concrete foundation will be poured in the morning but we wanted God's Word to a part of the building foundation. Great things are happening in the Harleton Archery program!

