

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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March 9, 2022

**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: [tracy.dorland@jeffco.k12.co.us](mailto:tracy.dorland@jeffco.k12.co.us)**

Tracy Dorland  
Superintendent  
Jeffco Public Schools  
1829 Denver West Drive #27  
Golden, Colorado 80401

Re: Unconstitutional Religious Field Trip

Dear Superintendent Dorland:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation occurring in Jeffco Public Schools. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 36,000 members across the country, including more than 1,100 members in Colorado and chapters in Denver and Colorado Springs. 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 parent has reported that Drake Middle School partnered with IdRaHaJe, a Christian evangelical camp, for an outdoor education experience called “IdRaHaJe Mountain Lab School” during the week of February 21, 2022. Our complainant reports that the camp is rife with religious imagery, including Latin crosses, and that religious literature was available throughout the camp. This imagery also appears on the program’s website. Please see the enclosed screenshot. Our complainant also rightly raised concerns about the District partnering with and giving financial support to this Christian camp.

IdRaHaJe stands for “I’d Rather Have Jesus” and was established:<sup>1</sup>

for the purpose of winning souls to Jesus Christ through the spreading of the Gospel, the edifying (building up) of the believers through the preaching and teaching of the Word of God, and the evangelizing of campers through witnessing and missions. The method of reaching these goals or purposes shall include all areas of service and worship that are in agreement with the principles in God’s Word, the Holy Bible until Jesus comes.

IdRaHaJe’s entire purpose for existing is to spread Christianity:<sup>2</sup>

IdRaHaJe exists so that all who enter its gates would experience God in a new way. Since 1948, we have had a great history in the Denver area impacting many lives for Jesus Christ. Our hope is that all who visit would say, “I’d rather have Jesus more than anything!”- the words of the song for which IdRaHaJe is named. (If you take the first two letters from each word of the title, you get Id-Ra-Ha-Je.)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://idrahaje.org/about-us/mission-and-values/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://idrahaje.org/about-us/who-we-are/>

Despite its supposed secular nature, IdRaHaJe admits even its Mountain Lab School's purpose is to convert students to Christianity.<sup>3</sup>

We are a year-round ministry in the mountains of Colorado that offers three main programs: Summer Camp, **Mountain Lab School** and Retreat Groups. **Each of our programs has unique objectives but one main purpose, to faithfully share Jesus Christ's love with others.** We believe that when young people are at Camp they are able to consider some of the most important issues and truths in life. We have seen, time and time again, God work in the lives of campers as they discover that God loves them and has an amazing plan for their lives. We are committed to the importance of this work and being faithful stewards of the message of salvation found only in Jesus Christ.

IdRaHaJe holds anti-LGBT views that are detrimental to Jeffco's diverse student body:<sup>4</sup>

We believe that marriage has been instituted and ordained by God, and that marriage is defined as the exclusive covenantal union of one male and one female in which such union is a lifetime commitment. (Matt. 19:4-6) We believe that same sex relationships which are romantically expressed are unacceptable according to the teaching of Scripture.

We recognize that there are people who experience gender dysphoria. The truths we affirm on this subject are that God has immutably created each person as either male or female in His image (Gen. 1:27) and that the differentiation of the sexes, male and female, is part of the divine image in the human race (Gen. 1:27).

While it is our understanding that the program students participated in was secular in nature, it was led by IdRaHaJe staff, all of whom are required to be Christians, and must agree with IdRaHaJe's doctrinal statement including the anti-LGBT views.<sup>5</sup>

We write to ask that the District cease partnering with and allowing its schools to take students to this Christian evangelical camp. The District should be inclusive of all its students, regardless of their religious or nonreligious beliefs and their sexual orientations and identities. IdRaHaJe is simply not an appropriate destination for public school field trips.

It is well settled that public schools may not advance 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 Twp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962). Moreover, "the preservation and transmission of religious beliefs and worship is a responsibility and a choice committed to the private sphere." *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 310 (2000) (quoting *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. at 589). In *Lee v. Weisman*, the Supreme Court extended the prohibition of school sponsored religious activities beyond the classroom to all school functions, holding prayers at public high school graduations an impermissible establishment of religion. As a school-sponsored event, a school field trip cannot include any endorsement of religion.

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<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> <https://idrahaje.org/doctrinal-statement/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://idrahaje.org/summer-camps/summer-staff/>

Given IdRaHaJe’s overt and unambiguous Christian agenda, the District is at risk of illegally endorsing a religious message in violation of the Constitution. Sending students to a Christian camp ostracizes those students and families who identify as nonreligious, practice a minority religion, or who support LGBT students and families. Non-religious Americans make up 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 one in four Americans who are religiously unaffiliated.<sup>6</sup> There is no doubt that many Jeffco Public Schools students and parents are non-Christian and nonreligious, and their freedom of conscience, as well as LGBT students and families, must be respected.

Please note that the fact that students and parents may be able to opt-out of these trips does not cure this constitutional violation. The Supreme Court has held that voluntariness does not remedy an Establishment Clause violation. *See generally Lee*, 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) (“Thus, the short, and to me sufficient, answer is that the availability of excusal or exemption simply has no relevance to the establishment question . . . .”); *Mellen v. Bunting*, 327 F.3d 355, 372 (4th Cir. 2003) (“VMI cannot avoid Establishment Clause problems by simply asserting that a cadet’s attendance at supper or his or her participation in the supper prayer are ‘voluntary.’”).

We ask that you investigate this situation and ensure that the District is respecting the right of conscience of its students and their families. The District should refrain from scheduling trips to IdRaHaJe in the future. Please respond in writing outlining the steps that the District will take to address this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Line". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Christopher Line  
Staff Attorney  
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure

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<sup>6</sup> *In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (Oct. 17, 2019), available at <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

## SETTING AND FACILITIES

Nestled in the coniferous forest of Colorado's front range, near [Bailey, CO](#), IdRaHaJe's property is an ideal setting for an incredible outdoor education experience. At nearly 8,700 feet elevation, consisting of over 260 acres of forests, meadows and trails and equipped with multiple facilities and a myriad of adventure and educational resources, we can provide groups with a high quality program in a marvelous setting. If you are staying for an overnight experience, we have three winterized [facilities](#) with heated bunkrooms, dining halls and meeting spaces. All participants, will have the opportunity to enjoy our exceptional Gym and Education Center which houses a 45-foot indoor climbing area, wildlife classroom, shops and full basketball court.

