

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

May 15, 2013

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL AND EMAIL to dmoye@lumpkin.k12.ga.us

Mr. Dewey Moye
Superintendent
Lumpkin County School System
56 Indian Drive
Dahlonega, GA 30533

Re: Prayer Rally discipline, lack of investigation, and coverup

Dear Mr. Moye:

I wrote to you on May 9 to explain the Freedom From Religion Foundation's concerns with your decision not to discipline students and staff involved in the May 1 prayer rally during instructional time. We also explained that this rally is a result of the failure of Lumpkin County Schools (LCS) to address the encroachment of religion into the public schools in the first place. Since that event several other local residents, concerned citizens, and families have reached out to FFRF.

The purpose of this letter is to let you know that we have information suggesting that this incident was far more egregious than has been reported. First, we are told that the district has done little, if anything, investigation of this incident. Failing to discipline violators and willfully ignoring facts will not make this problem go away; it will only encourage repetition of similar violations. We received additional reports:

1. That far more teachers and staff were involved in the incident than has been suggested and reported by both the media and your office;
2. That some participating staff are related to Lumpkin County Board of Education members;
3. That early in the school day the principal was, at the very least aware that the incident was occurring; and
4. That adult individuals unaffiliated with the school entered campus and engaged the students in prayer.

We laid out the legal and constitutional issues in our last letter and will not rehash the clearly unconstitutional nature of this incident. However, the facts and reports in this letter suggest the systemic problem of religion in LCS is far worse than we first understood. Moreover, the apparent lack of transparency by the district and the reported close family relation of staffers involved in the incident to members of the Board of Education suggest that this information was deliberately withheld and suppressed.

We have been told that **up to 12 teachers and staff participated in the prayer rally** throughout the day. We have confirmation that some students went through entire class periods without any adult supervision or teacher present to actually do their job — teach. We understand that the event began as reported, with a student seeking religious counseling from a teacher who is also the sponsor of the

Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Apparently this teacher got in touch with a social studies teacher who is also a part time preacher at the Friendship Baptist Church of Dahlonaga. We understand this teacher led the six-hour event.

We have also been told that **at least three of the staff members who participated in the prayers are related to Lumpkin County Board of Education members, and in one instance, is married to a Board member.** This raises serious ethical and legal issues for your district and could explain the lack of investigation and discipline on your part. Treating staffers with personal relationships to Board of Education members differently than you would treat other rule-breakers is favoritism and nepotism at its worst. Policies and rules exist to ensure that such disparate treatment does not occur.

In our previous letter we wrote that Principal Conner either “knew this was happening and didn’t stop it or he did not know that a significant portion of his charges and employees were violating the Constitution, state law, and school rules. Each is a serious dereliction of duty.” We have been informed that Conner left campus early that morning for an all day meeting. However, we also understand that **Conner was at least aware that the incident was occurring before he left campus** – and that he did nothing to stop the illegal assembly.

We also understand that Conner has himself deliberately injected religion in Lumpkin County Schools on other occasions. In a *New York Times* article from 2006, a biology teacher, wishing to teach evolution, had to go through a meeting with Conner regarding her class. She relates the experience:

“He took a Bible off the bookshelf behind him and said, ‘[I] believe in everything in this book, do you?’ I told him, ‘I really feel uncomfortable about your asking that question.’ [But] he wouldn’t let it go.”¹

This teacher eventually had to fill out a grievance because she was being “threatened and harassed” by staff for following the approved curriculum. This all occurred under Conner’s, and for that matter, your, watch. This presents serious issues regarding Conner’s knowledge and complicity in the illegal incident. Surely if he’s willing to inject religion into the public school in one instance he is willing to facilitate, participate, or allow it in another instance.

Finally, and perhaps most disturbingly, it has been reported to FFRF that **at least three adult individuals with no school affiliation or authority entered the campus, went to the gym, and joined the students and staff in prayer.** There is no suggestion that the teachers involved in the incident reported the presence of these strangers to school authorities or attempted to make them leave campus. Instead, we understand that they were welcomed into the prayer group. We also have a report that one of the interlopers entered the cafeteria and harangued students for not participating in the prayers.

This is appalling. These people were not vetted for criminal backgrounds. They walked freely into a public school and a throng of overly emotional class-skipping students. Teachers participating in the prayers were clearly aware of this outside presence and did nothing. This shows a stunning callousness for the safety of the students under your charge — particularly when combined with the lack of discipline for teachers who totally abandoned their classrooms.

¹ Michael Winerip, “Evolution’s Lonely Battle in a Georgia Classroom,” *The New York Times* (June 28, 2006) available at http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/28/education/28education.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

An immediate and thorough investigation is required. We understand the ACLU is independently investigating, we suggest you instruct all staff comply openly and honestly with that investigation. We suggest that you and the board take immediate steps to ensure students, teachers, and staff who cooperate with the investigation fully and honestly will not receive and retribution from the administration. It is overdue that you identify all staff members involved and discipline them accordingly.

We renew our call for the permanent removal of the teachers and staff directly involved in this incident, including Principal Conner. Lumpkin County's disregard for student safety, student rights, the Constitution, and basic ethics must cease.



Andrew L. Seidel
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation