

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

August 18, 2023

**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: [Jeremy.Powers@marion.k12.fl.us](mailto:Jeremy.Powers@marion.k12.fl.us)**

Jeremy Powers  
School Board Attorney  
Marion County Public Schools  
1614 E. Fort King Street  
Ocala, FL 34471

Re: Unconstitutional “prayer walk” event and open records request

Dear Mr. Powers:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding another constitutional violation that recently occurred in Marion Public Schools. We are still awaiting a response to our February 25, 2022 and June 8, 2023 letters. We would like to work with the District to resolve these matters.

A concerned District community member has reported that the District allowed members of the Church of Hope to wander through schools throughout the District to “cleanse” them. It is our understanding that 400 members of the Church of Hope “fanned out in small groups to perform Prayer Walks at 43 Marion County Public Schools” on Sunday, August 6.<sup>1</sup> We understand this event was hosted by the District, that “school representatives” were present to lead church members through the schools, and that students also took part.<sup>2</sup> Brain Till, an associate pastor at Church of Hope noted that the Church had “partnered” with the District to put on this religious worship event.<sup>3</sup> Please see the enclosed screenshots, which show church members wandering throughout the District’s schools.

We write to request that the District immediately cease partnering with churches to host religious worship events in its schools and ensure that this event does not recur in the future. Please respond to the included open records request so that we can better understand the extent of the District’s organization of this event.

Public schools have a constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion. It is well settled that public schools may not show favoritism towards or coerce belief or participation in any 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.*

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.ocala.com/story/news/education/2023/08/07/church-of-hope-prayer-teams-visited-schools-sunday-school-starts-thursday/70541304007/>

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

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

*Dist. of Abington Twp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *McCollum v Bd. of Ed.*, 333 U.S. 203 (1948). Government-sponsored religious exercise “has the improper effect of coercing those present to participate in an act of religious worship.” *Santa Fe*, at 312. Here, the District is displaying blatant favoritism towards religion over nonreligion by partnering with a church to hold a sprawling religious worship event where hundreds of church members were given access to dozens of school facilities.

The District serves a diverse population that consists of not only religious students, families, and employees, but also atheists, agnostics, and those who are simply religiously unaffiliated. Partnering with a local church and allowing church members access to all of its schools for the purposes of prayer sends an official message that excludes all nonreligious District students and community members. Thirty-seven percent of the American population is non-Christian, including the almost 30 percent<sup>4</sup> who are nonreligious. At least a third of Generation Z (those born after 1996) have no religion,<sup>5</sup> with a recent survey revealing almost half of Gen Z qualify as “nones” (religiously unaffiliated).<sup>6</sup>

Unless the District’s facility use policies allow any outside organization the opportunity to freely roam the hallways and classrooms of all of its schools, then this event must not be allowed to occur in the future. All future school-sponsored events must be completely secular in order to respect the constitutional rights of students, families, and employees. Please respond in writing with the steps the District is taking to address this situation so that we may inform our complainant, and please respond to the following open records request. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

### **Open Records Request**

Pursuant to the Florida Sunshine Law (Fl. Stat. §119), I request a copy of the following records:

- 1) Any and all applications and contracts between Marion County Public Schools (“District”) and the Church of Hope (“Church”) regarding the use of District facilities.
- 2) A copy of any receipts or payment histories verifying rental payment by the Church.
- 3) Any policy and/or rental rate schedule for use of District facilities.
- 4) All communications, including emails, between District staff and representatives of the Church regarding this event.

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<sup>4</sup> Gregory A. Smith, *About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated*, Pew Research Center (Dec. 14, 2021), [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/).

<sup>5</sup> Samuel J. Abrams, *Perspective: Why even secular people should worry about Gen Z’s lack of faith*, Deseret News (Mar. 4, 2023), [www.deseret.com/2023/3/4/23617175/gen-z-faith-religious-nones-civic-life-volunteers-charity](http://www.deseret.com/2023/3/4/23617175/gen-z-faith-religious-nones-civic-life-volunteers-charity)

<sup>6</sup> 2022 Cooperative Election Study of 60,000 respondents, analyzed by Ryan P. Burge [www.religioninpublic.blog/2023/04/03/gen-z-and-religion-in-2022/](http://www.religioninpublic.blog/2023/04/03/gen-z-and-religion-in-2022/).

If any of these records are available through electronic media, they may be e-mailed to **chris@ffrf.org**. If I can provide any clarification that will help expedite your attention to my request, please contact me at 608-256-8900. I appreciate your time and attention to this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Line". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Christopher Line  
Staff Attorney  
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosures

