

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

November 9, 2022

**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: farrell.seymore@opelikaschools.org**

Dr. Farrell Seymore  
Superintendent  
300 Simmons Street  
Opelika, AL 36801

Re: Unconstitutional bible distribution

Dear Superintendent Seymore:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation that occurred at the Opelika High School 2022 graduation ceremony. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 38,000 members across the country, including members in Alabama. 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 reported that Gideon bibles were distributed as part of the May 27, 2022 Opelika High School graduation. We are told that school staff handed graduating seniors envelopes filled with graduation materials directly after the ceremony, and that the envelopes included Gideon bibles.

We request that the District investigate this matter and ensure that bibles are not distributed as part of future graduations.

It is well settled that public schools may not show favoritism towards, nor encourage or coerce belief 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. 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). Yet, a public high school demonstrates clear favoritism towards religion when it distributes Gideon bibles to its graduating class.

Public schools have a constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion and to protect the rights of conscience of students. When a school distributes religious literature to its students, it entangles itself with that religious message. Distributing bibles needlessly alienates students who are non-Christians, including those belonging to the almost thirty percent of Americans who are not religious.<sup>1</sup> Graduation is a once in a lifetime event for students. There's no need to taint the experience for graduating seniors who are nonreligious or part of minority faiths by including bibles in their graduation materials.

Additionally, the District should not create a policy whereby any private organization may take advantage of school resources to further its personal goals. FFRF has sought to distribute our own literature, such as

---

<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/).

“An X-Rated Book: Sex and Obscenity in the Bible” and “What Does the Bible Say About Abortion?” alongside bibles, and may seek to do so in any school district that maintains an open forum.<sup>2</sup> If a public school has a policy that allows religious materials to be distributed, the school cannot discriminate against any religious or nonreligious viewpoint. The best solution is a policy that does not allow third-party literature distribution.

We ask that Opelika City Schools educate their employees regarding their constitutional obligations to ensure that the rights of students are protected. Opelika’s High School graduation ceremony should not be used as an opportunity to illegally distribute bibles or any other religious literature to graduating students. We request specific assurances that the school will not provide bibles to students at future graduations. Please inform us in writing of the steps the District is taking to remedy this constitutional violation so that we may inform our complainant.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Samantha F. Lawrence". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "S" and a distinct "L" at the end.

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

---

<sup>2</sup> See <http://goo.gl/9AIp9s>.