

October 19, 2010

SENT VIA EMAIL AND MAIL

Mr. James Ramsey
Superintendent
Perkins-Tyron Public Schools
PO Box 549
Perkins OK 74059

Re: Bible Distribution in Intermediate School Classrooms

Dear Superintendent Ramsey:

I am writing on behalf of a concerned district resident and taxpayer, and other members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to alert you to a serious Establishment Clause violation at Perkins-Tyron Intermediate School. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with 16,000 members across the country, including members in Oklahoma. Our purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

It is our information and understanding that persons from Gideons International distributed bibles at Perkins-Tyron Intermediate school last week. We are told that the Gideons distributed bibles in classrooms during instructional time.

It is unconstitutional for public school districts to allow the Gideons to distribute bibles during the school day. Courts uniformly have held the distribution of bibles to students at public schools during instructional time is prohibited. *See Roark v. South Iron R-1 Sch. Dist.*, 573 F.3d 556 (8th Cir. 2009) (striking down policy allowing distribution of bibles in front of administrative offices or at table in corner of school cafeteria); *Berger v. Rensselaer Central Sch. Corp.*, 982 F.2d 1160 (7th Cir. 1993) (held that classroom distribution of Gideon bibles to fifth-graders violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution); *Tudor v. Board of Education of Rutherford*, 14 N.J. 31 (1953), *cert. denied*, 348 U.S. 816 (1954) (finding unconstitutional a school board resolution permitting the distribution of bibles by Gideons). In striking down a school district's policy permitting Gideons to distribute bibles at the schools, the Seventh Circuit stated, "... the Gideon Bible is unabashedly Christian. In permitting distribution of 'The New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ' along with limited excerpts from the Old Testament, the schools affront not only non-religious people but all those whose faiths, or lack of faith, does not encompass the New Testament."

Public schools have a constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion. When a school distributes religious literature to its students, it has unconstitutionally entangled itself with a religious message, in this case, a Christian message. Such a practice alienates those non-Christian students, teachers, and members of the public whose religious beliefs are inconsistent with the message being promoted by the school. It also alienates the 15% of the U.S. population who are nonreligious (American Religious Identification Survey, 2008).

Perkins-Tyron Public Schools should not allow Gideons, or any other religious groups, to come into any of its schools and distribute religious literature during the school day. In allowing Gideons to distribute bibles to impressionable young school children, the school is placing its “stamp of approval” on the religious messages contained in the bible. Whether or not a bible is forced on a student, this policy is still an unconstitutional endorsement of religion, specifically Christianity, by a public school.

The school district must take immediate action to ensure that Gideons International is not allowed in the future to proselytize a captive audience of children by distributing Christian literature in Perkins-Tyron Public Schools. We would suggest a memo to District officials and principals advising them of the illegality of the Gideon’s predatory and aggressive proselytizing on school property. We ask that you promptly inform us, in writing, of the steps you are taking to remedy these constitutional concerns so that we may notify our complainant.

Sincerely,

Patrick C. Elliott
Staff Attorney

cc: Principal Donna Boles
VIA EMAIL