

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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September 9, 2021

**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: [jeff.wright@pwschools.org](mailto:jeff.wright@pwschools.org)**

Jeff Wright  
Superintendent  
Pewamo-Westphalia Community Schools  
District Office  
5101 Clintonia Rd.  
Westphalia, MI 48894

Re: Multiple Constitutional Violations

Dear Superintendent Wright:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding multiple constitutional violations occurring in Pewamo-Westphalia Community Schools. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 35,000 members across the country, including more than 800 members in Michigan. 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 student has reported multiple instances of religious promotion by District staff members at Pewamo-Westphalia Middle/High School. Our complainant reports that multiple staff members display religious messages, imagery, and bible verses in their classrooms or offices. One teacher has a stone with "What Would Jesus Do" carved into it displayed on their desk. Another teacher has a figurine with, "PRESS ON towards the goal - Philippians 3:1-4" displayed on their desk. The principal has a display with a Latin cross and the message "Greater love has no one than this, that is to lay down his life for his friends - John 15:13" on his desk. There is also a Latin cross on display in the library. Please see the enclosed photos.

Our complainant also reports that teachers at the school sometimes discuss their religious beliefs with students or generally promote their religion to students.

We write to ensure that the District will no longer allow its staff to promote and endorse religion to students, and that these religious displays will be removed immediately.

It is a violation of the Constitution for any school representative to promote a religious message to students, either through religious displays or in direct communications with students. It is a fundamental principle of Establishment Clause jurisprudence that public schools may not advance, prefer, 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). By displaying religious messages and discussing religion with students, District staff members have violated the principle that "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*, 505 U.S. at 589).

Public schools have a duty to ensure that “subsidized teachers do not inculcate religion” or use their positions of authority to promote a particular religious viewpoint. *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602, 619 (1971).

Courts have continually held that school districts may not display religious messages or iconography in public schools. *See, e.g., Stone v. Graham*, 449 U.S. 39 (1980) (ruling that the Ten Commandments may not be displayed on classroom walls); *Lee v. York County*, 484 F.3d 689 (4th Cir. 2007) (ruling that a teacher may be barred from displaying religious messages on classroom bulletin boards); *Washegesic v. Bloomington Pub. Schs.*, 33 F. 3d 679 (6th Cir. 1994) (ruling that a picture of Jesus may not be displayed in a public school).

Religion is a divisive force in public schools. The Supreme Court has repeatedly noted that “[s]chool sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible because it sends the ancillary message to members of the audience who are nonadherents ‘that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.’” *Santa Fe*, 530 U.S. 290 at 309 (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring)).

These religious displays and the conduct of staff members is particularly inappropriate given that about 38% of Americans born after 1987 are not religious.<sup>1</sup> These displays alienate those nonreligious students, families, teachers, and members of the public whose religious beliefs are inconsistent with the message being promoted by the school.

We ask that you investigate this situation and remind staff members of their duty to remain neutral toward religion while acting in their official capacity. These religious displays, and any others, should be removed and staff members must cease promoting religion to students. Please inform us in writing of the steps that the District is taking to address these concerns so that we may notify our complainant.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Line". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Christopher Line  
Staff Attorney  
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosures

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<sup>1</sup> Robert P. Jones & Daniel Cox, *America’s Changing Religious Identity*, PUBLIC RELIGION RESEARCH INSTITUTE (Sept. 6, 2017), available at [www.ppri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf](http://www.ppri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf).



