

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL

LenkerE@pitt.k12.nc.us

Dr. Ethan Lenker
Superintendent
Pitt County Schools
1717 W. 5th Street
Greenville, NC 27834

Re: Unconstitutional religious recruitment

Dear Superintendent Lenker:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding unconstitutional religious proselytizing in Pitt County Schools. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 31,000 members across the country, including more than 650 members in North Carolina. Our purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

A concerned parent contacted us to report that adults from WyldLife, a Christian organization, regularly recruit students during the lunch hour at Hope Middle School. According to their website, WyldLife is branch of Young Life, an organization whose goal is to “personally impact area teenagers and to point them to a relationship with a God.”¹ WyldLife specifically targets middle school students in order to “model and express God's love to our young friends.”²

We understand that Hope Middle School gave permission to adults from WyldLife to talk to students at lunchtime every Monday. One of these WyldLife representatives reportedly collected contact information from middle school students and attempted to contact our complainant's child after school hours. It is our understanding that the adults from WyldLife seek to recruit for their religious events.

¹ <https://pittcounty.younglife.org/Pages/default.aspx>

² <https://pittcounty.younglife.org/Pages/Wyldlife-080515-110110.aspx>

It is well settled that public schools may not advance 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); *McCollum v Bd. of Edu.*, 333 U.S. 203 (1948). Moreover, “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 v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. at 589).

It is inappropriate and unconstitutional for the District to offer youth ministers unique access to befriend and proselytize students during the school day on school property. No outside adults should be provided carte blanche access to minors – a captive audience – in a public school. This predatory conduct is inappropriate and should raise many red flags. It is especially concerning that Wyldlife representatives are seeking the cell phone numbers of students and having unmonitored conversations with impressionable children.

Allowing ministers one-time, much less weekly, access to proselytize and recruit students during school hours is a violation of the Establishment Clause. *See McCollum v. Bd. of Educ.*, 333 U.S. 203, 212 (1948) (holding that the use of public school facilities by religious organizations to give religious instruction to school children violates the Establishment Clause). When the school grants WyldLife ministers access to students, it advances WyldLife's mission of proselytizing. These evangelists are using schools to befriend students, discuss how fun their religious club is, and then invite students to religious activities.

The courts have protected public school students from overreaching outsiders in similar situations, repeatedly striking down practices that affiliate schools with religious groups and religious instruction. *See, e.g., Roark v. South Iron R-1 School Dist.* 540 F. Supp. 2d 1047, 1059 (E.D.Mo., 2008); *upheld in relevant part by* 573 F.3d 556, (8th Cir. 2009) (holding that school policy allowing evangelical Christian organization to distribute bibles in school violated Establishment Clause); *HS v. Huntington County Community School Corp.*, 616 F. Supp. 2d 863 (N.D. Ind. 2009) (issuing preliminary injunction against school that allowed trailers on school property for religious instruction because to do so conveyed a message of support and endorsement of religion); *Doe ex rel. Doe v. Beaumont Independent School Dist.*, 173 F.3d 274 (5th Cir. 1999) (ruling that school partnership with clergy for counseling purposes violated Establishment Clause).

Allowing a Christian group access to proselytize students demonstrates an unlawful preference not only for religion over non-religion, but also Christianity over other

faiths. This “[s]chool sponsorship of religious message[s] 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 the accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.’” *Santa Fe*, 530 U.S. at 309-10 (2000) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring)).

Pitt County Schools must immediately stop allowing adults from WyldLife access to students during the school day. We request a written response informing us of the steps the District takes to remedy this constitutional violation. Thank you in advance for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Patrick C. Elliott
Senior Counsel

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