

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

November 6, 2020

**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: wes.bridges@polk-fl.net**

Wes Bridges  
General Counsel  
Polk County Public Schools  
P.O. Box 391  
Bartow, FL 33831

Re: Continued Religious Promotion in Polk County Public Schools

Dear Mr. Bridges:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding another constitutional violation occurring in Polk County Public Schools. We are still awaiting a response to our January 10, 2020 letter regarding multiple issues in the District. You let us know on May 7, 2020 that you would “see to it as [district schools] reopen.” We followed up with you on September 25, 2020 but have yet to receive a substantive response to our letter. We ask that you please respond regarding this new issue and our previous letter as well so that we can work with the District to resolve these matters.

Concerned local residents have reported that West Central Florida Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) was granted access by PCPS to school property and school employees in order to create a promotional video for its religious organization. The video also raises serious concerns about how the FCA is utilizing PCPS to recruit and proselytize to students. The video has several scenes showing former Kathleen High School football coach Anthony Troutman promoting this religious organization while also on school property, including a school weight room, stadium, and gymnasium.<sup>1</sup>

In the video, FCA employees Mark Wilson and Terry Green discuss how they are taking advantage of PCPS in order to grow their religious ministry. They recognize that they have “the unique opportunity to be on school campuses...and [they are] taking the gospel to [students] through this platform of sport.”<sup>2</sup> Mr. Wilson explains that his employees at FCA are going into schools in order to proselytize to students.<sup>3</sup> Coach Troutman explains how the FCA works to bring local churches onto campus in order to recruit students as part of their religious mission, specifically mentioning that Grace City Church was able to go into Kathleen High School to recruit students.<sup>4</sup> Terry Green brags that FCA “character coaches” are the organization’s “bread

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0IIAiqdCW08&t>

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 5:30.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 7:15.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 13:45.

and butter.”<sup>5</sup> We understand that these character coaches are outside adults that are being allowed into team locker rooms and on the sideline at games, and allowed to interact and preach with students throughout the District.

As you are aware, District employees and coaches may not grant outside adults access to school-sponsored activities to proselytize to students or agree to have a volunteer teach other people’s children that character centers on religious belief, because public schools may not advance or promote religion. *See generally, Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2001); *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 Twshp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962). Allowing an outside religious organization to use District property and employees in order to create a recruitment and fundraising video raises additional concerns about PCPS advancing and promoting religion.

When the District allows a religious group to utilize school resources for its fundraising and promotional efforts, and when public school employees allow outside adults to subject students to religious proselytization, the District endorses a religious message, and it “employ[s] the machinery of the state to enforce a religious orthodoxy.” *Lee*, 505 U.S. at 592. The “[s]chool sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible because it send the ancillary message to . . . 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. at 309-10 (internal quotations omitted.) It excludes the 35% of Americans who are not Christian.<sup>6</sup>

It is inappropriate and unconstitutional for the District to offer religious leaders unique access to school resources and opportunities to befriend and proselytize students during school events and on school property. No outside adults should be provided carte blanche access to minors—a captive audience—in a public school. This conduct is inappropriate and should raise many red flags. The District cannot allow its schools to be used as recruiting grounds for religious groups.

Allowing church representatives regular, or even one-time, access during school hours to proselytize and recruit students for religious activities is a violation of the Establishment Clause. The courts have protected public school students from overreaching outsiders in similar situations. *See, e.g., Berger v. Rensselaer School District*, 982 F.2d 1160 (7th Cir. 1993) (holding that distribution of bibles by Gideons in school violated Establishment Clause). Courts have granted injunctions against schools for their complacency in such situations. *See, e.g., Roark v. South Iron R-1 Sch. 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).

It is especially important that District employees and coaches maintain arm’s length separation from the FCA and its events, given the FCA’s overt campaign to use coaches to promote

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<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 15:20.

<sup>6</sup> *In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (Oct. 17, 2019), available at <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

Christianity to student athletes.<sup>7</sup> The FCA explicitly declares its intention to get coaches to “play the role as pastors,” which, if successful, would amount to a clear violation of the Establishment Clause by the District.

We ask that the District commence an investigation into the complaint alleged and take immediate action to ensure that its sports programs are no longer allowing outside adults, including FCA volunteers, to have access to evangelize to students during school-sponsored events in violation of students’ constitutional rights. Please inform us in writing of the steps the District is taking to remedy this serious and flagrant violation of the First Amendment.

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

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<sup>7</sup> See *To and Through the Coach*, Fellowship of Christian Athletes (March 13, 2019), available at <https://fcaresources.com/video/and-through-coach> (“[the FCA has] begun to take more strategy, more structure, more intentionality to minister to the heart of the coach, to their family, and ultimately to their team... Getting to [students] as a total person—witnessing to them and helping them develop as spiritual men and women as well.” “[Coaches] play the role as pastors. They play the role as parents. They play the role as mentor.”).