

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: freddie.williamson@robeson.k12.nc.us

Freddie Williamson
Superintendent
Public Schools of Robeson County
100 Hargrave St.
Lumberton, NC 28358

Re: Unconstitutional Proselytizing in School

Dear Superintendent Williamson:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation occurring in the Public Schools of Robeson County. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 36,000 members across the country, including more than 800 members in North Carolina. 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 local resident has reported that at least three high schools in your district recently allowed Michael S. Bowen, a pastor from East Lumberton Baptist Church, to proselytize to students. On May 17, 2021, Bowen posted a video of “Tent Revival Evangelist” Tyler Blue proselytizing to students at the Lumberton High School stadium.¹ In the video, Bowen brags, “Here at a public high school sharing the gospel. We’re excited about that.” On May 19, 2021, the district allowed Bowen to proselytize to students from St. Paul’s High School at the school’s stadium. On May 20, 2021, the district allowed Bowen to proselytize to students from Fairmont High School in the school’s gymnasium. Please see the enclosed screenshots.

It is inappropriate and unconstitutional for the district to offer religious leaders unique access to befriend and proselytize students during school activities 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. The district cannot allow its schools to be used as recruiting grounds for churches. 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); *McCullum v. Bd. of Ed.*, 333 U.S. 203 (1948).

Allowing church representatives regular, or even one-time, access to proselytize to and recruit students for religious activities is a violation of the Establishment Clause. The courts have

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/godsavs/videos/10208330957987873>

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 organizations to distribute bibles in school violated Establishment Clause).

The district cannot allow non-school persons to treat schools as a recruiting ground for their religious mission. It demonstrates an unlawful preference not only for religion over non-religion, but also Christianity over all other faiths. Public schools have a constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion. When a school allows church representatives to recruit students for the church, it has unconstitutionally entangled itself with a religious message—in this case, a Christian message. This practice alienates those non-Christian students, teachers, and members of the public whose religious beliefs are inconsistent with the message being disseminated by the school.

Public schools have an obligation to stay separate from religion because “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. 577, 589 (1992)). Students are young, impressionable, and vulnerable to social pressure, particularly pressure exerted by an adult. This practice usurps the authority of parents, some of whom surely do not want their children approached by religious leaders while they are on school property participating in school activities.

Public schools are not an appropriate place for outside adults to convince students to attend their church. This recruitment constitutes “a utilization of the tax-established and tax-supported public school system to aid religious groups to spread their faith.” *McCollum*, 333 U.S. at 210

We ask that the district investigate this complaint and ensure that Mr. Bowen, or any other religious leaders, are no longer allowed to proselytize to students on school property during school-sponsored events and related activities. Please inform us promptly in writing of the steps the district takes to remedy this constitutional concern.

Sincerely,



Christopher Line
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

CAL:am

Enclosure



Michael S. Bowen

May 19 · 🌐

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We just shared the Gospel with the athletes at St. Paul's High School and 22 kids prayed to receive Christ. Praise the Lord!



Michael S. Bowen

May 20 · 🌐

...

We just shared the Gospel with some athletes at Fairmont High School and 9 of them got saved. Praise God!

