

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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January 18, 2024

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: dacar@urbandaleschools.com

Superintendent Rosalie Daca
Urbandale Community School District
7111 NW. Aurora Avenue
Urbandale, IA 50322

Re: Inappropriate adult participation in student religious club

Dear Superintendent Daca:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation occurring in the Urbandale Community School District. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 40,000 members across the country, including members in Iowa. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

We received a report that an adult representative of the Central Iowa chapter of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes has been inappropriately involved in Urbandale High School's basketball program. It is our understanding that an adult representative of the FCA, [REDACTED], serves as a "character coach" for the Boys' Basketball program at Urbandale HS. The local FCA chapter confirmed this via social media.¹ On January 7, 2024, before a basketball game, members of the team met with [REDACTED] for a "pre-game chapel."² [REDACTED] does not appear to be employed by the school district in any official capacity. The message posted by the Central Iowa FCA is joined with a quote from the bible:³

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Matthew 5:6.

Please see the enclosed copy of the post.

We ask that the District investigate this matter and ensure that Urbandale HS ceases allowing [REDACTED] or any other adult representative from the FCA, to regularly participate in student religious clubs or school-sponsored events.

It is well settled that public schools may not show favoritism towards or coerce belief or participation in 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). A public school may not give a religious organization or its representative special access to students for the purpose of promoting religion and proselytizing students, including leading students in religious activities.

Student athletes are especially susceptible to coercion. When their school's athletic program allows an adult representative of a religious organization to lead student athletes in a "pre-game chapel," the students will no

¹ @CentralIowaFCA, *Rollie Clarkson, the Urbandale BB character coach, met with some of the team for a pre-game chapel before the Dowling game. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Matthew 5:6. Area Rep: Renee Carver, Central Iowa FCA, Jan. 7, 2024, <https://x.com/centraliowafca/status/1744161999053816192?s=46>.*

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

doubt feel that participating in that religious activity is essential to pleasing their team's coach and being viewed as a team player. It is unrealistic and unconstitutional to give student athletes an ultimatum of allowing their constitutional rights to be violated in order to maintain good standing in the eyes of their coach and peers or openly dissenting at the risk of retaliation from their coach and teammates. Putting student athletes in that position is not only unfair, but also violates their First Amendment rights.

Further, the District may not allow outside adults or organizations to lead, organize, or regularly participate in "student" religious clubs. The Equal Access Act dictates the limited extent to which religious clubs may exist in secondary schools. The EAA requires that "**nonschool persons may not direct, conduct, control, or regularly attend activities of student groups.**" 20 U.S.C. § 4071(c)(5) (emphasis added). Any religious student clubs, such as FCA, must be bona fide student clubs that are student-led and student-organized. Outside adults—like Mr. Clarkson—cannot regularly attend FCA activities and any school staff in attendance may only participate in a supervisory capacity. Here, it appears that [REDACTED] may be regularly participating in, attending, and directing the Urbandale HS FCA's activities, as well as participating in school-sponsored athletic events, all in violation of both the EAA and the First Amendment.

Schools cannot constitutionally allow religious organizations to treat schools as a recruiting ground for their religious mission. Urbandale HS's custom and practice of allowing an outside representative of FCA unique access to its students demonstrates unconstitutional favoritism not only for religion over non-religion, but in this case Christianity over all other faiths. Urbandale High School's actions needlessly alienate and exclude those students who are a part of the 49 percent of Generation Z who are religiously unaffiliated.⁴

In order to comply with the EAA and the First Amendment, we ask that the District investigate this matter and ensure that Urbandale High School does not allow any outside adults to lead, organize, or regularly participate in FCA. Further, adult representatives of religious organizations must not be granted unique access to student athletes in order to potentially proselytize and indoctrinate them. Please respond in writing with the steps the District is taking to address this matter so that we may inform our complainant. Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sammi F. Lawrence". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sammi F. Lawrence
Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation

SFL:hmj

Enclosure

⁴ 2022 Cooperative Election Study of 60,000 respondents, analyzed by Ryan P. Burge, www.religioninpublic.blog/2023/04/03/gen-z-and-religion-in-2022/.



CentrallowaFCA
@centrallowafca

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Matthew 5:6

Area Rep: Renee Carver, Central Iowa FCA



7:00 PM · Jan 7, 2024 · 77 Views