

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

August 25, 2023

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: ccoles@vvuhsd.org

Carl J. Coles
Superintendent
Victor Valley Union High School District
16350 Mojave Drive
Victorville, CA 92395

Re: Unconstitutional religious display

Dear Superintendent Coles:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation occurring in the Victor Valley Union High School District. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including more than 5,200 members and two chapters in California. 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 District student has reported that Adelanto High School displays a religious message in the girls' bathroom near its front office. Our complainant reports that the display says, "Wash your HANDS and say your PRAYERS because Jesus and GERMS ARE EVERYWHERE." Please see the enclosed photo. Our complainant found this bizarre Christian message in their public school bathroom creepy and confusing.

We write to ask that the District remove this message and any other religious displays from its schools in order to protect the rights of students to be free from religious coercion in their public schools.

The District violates the Constitution when it allows its schools to display religious symbols or messages. It is well settled that public schools may not show favoritism towards or coerce belief or participation in religion. *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2000); *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). This display violates this basic constitutional prohibition by creating the appearance that the District prefers religion over nonreligion and Christianity over all other faiths.

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. Bloomingdale Pub. Schs.*, 33 F.3d 679 (6th Cir. 1994) (ruling that a painting 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*, at 309 (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring)).

Additionally, this religious display needlessly alienates those students who are a part of the 49 percent of Generation Z who are religiously unaffiliated.¹

In recognition of the District’s constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion, please remove this display from the bathroom at Adelanto High School, as well as any other religious displays it becomes aware of in its schools. Please reply in writing with the steps the District is taking to remedy this constitutional violation so that we may inform our complainant.

Sincerely,




Christopher Line
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure

¹ 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/.

Wash your
HANDS
and say your
PRAYERS

because

Jesus

And **GERMS**
ARE EVERYWHERE

