

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

April 15, 2024

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: shannon.christian@bremencs.com

Superintendent Shannon Christian
Bremen City Schools
501 Pacific Avenue
Bremen, GA 30110

Re: Unconstitutional “prayer walk” event and open records request

Dear Superintendent Christian,

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation set to occur in Bremen City Schools. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including over 600 members in Georgia. 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 parent reported that the District plans to allow outside adults to enter Jones Elementary School on April 21, 2024 in order to hold a “prayer walk.” Per a post from a local social media group for parents:

Hey Friends! I wanted to see if any of you would be interested in doing a prayer walk through the 3rd grade classrooms on the Sunday before milestones (April 21st)? I’m a firm believer that prayer is a powerful thing and I would love to cover each classroom, teacher, and student in prayer prior to that week. I emailed Mr. [REDACTED] this morning and he said he would be happy to open the building for us to come that Sunday afternoon.

It is our understanding that “Mr. [REDACTED]” refers to Jones Elementary’s principal, [REDACTED]. Please see the enclosed screenshot of the post.

We are told that this is not the first time the school has inappropriately blurred the lines between church and state. Our complainant states that they and their family are members of a minority faith and that their child is “constantly being othered in [their] own classroom.” Our complainant tells us that the school permits students to bully their child by regularly telling their child that they are “going to hell.” Our complainant is understandably upset that Jones Elementary plans to allow outside adults to hold a Christian prayer walk in the school building and include their child’s name in a religious ritual that they do not believe in.

We write to request that the District investigate this matter and ensure that this prayer walk does not take place at Jones Elementary. Additionally, please respond to the included open records request so that we can better understand the school’s involvement in organizing this event.

It is well settled that public schools may not show favoritism towards or coerce belief or participation in any 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); *McCollum v Bd. of Ed.*, 333 U.S. 203 (1948). Government-sponsored religious exercise “has the improper effect of coercing those present to participate in an act of religious worship.” *Santa Fe*, at 312. Here, the District is displaying blatant favoritism towards religion over nonreligion by permitting outside adults to host a Christian prayer walk in one of its elementary schools where participants will be given apparently unrestricted access to classrooms.

The District serves a diverse population that consists of not only Christian students, families, and employees, but also members of minority religions, such as our complainant and their child, as well as atheists, agnostics, and those who are simply religiously unaffiliated. In allowing outside adults to access the school building and hold a Christian prayer event, Jones Elementary is sending an official message that excludes all nonreligious and minority faith students, families, and community members.

Thirty-seven percent of the American population is non-Christian, including the almost 30 percent¹ who are nonreligious. At least a third of Generation Z (those born after 1996) have no religion,² with a recent survey revealing almost half of Gen Z qualify as “nones” (religiously unaffiliated).³

Unless the District’s facility use policies allow school principals to open schools to any outside group in order to freely roam the hallways and classrooms, then this event must not be allowed to occur. All school-sponsored events must be completely secular in order to respect the constitutional rights of students, families, and employees. Please respond in writing with the steps the District is taking to address this situation so that we may inform our complainant, and please respond to the following open records request. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Public Records Request

Pursuant to O.C.G.A. § 50-18-70 et. seq., I request a copy of the following records:

1. Any policy and/or rental rate schedule for community use of District facilities; and,
2. All communications, including emails, between District employees, administrators, or community members regarding the prayer walk planned for the weekend of April 21, 2024.

If you do not maintain these public records, please forward this request to the proper custodian and let me know the name and address of the custodians of these records.

I request these records within five business days of receipt of this request. If the District chooses to deny this request, please respond with a written explanation of the denial, including any references to applicable statutory exemptions relied upon. If any of these records are available through electronic

¹ Gregory A. Smith, et. al, *Religious ‘Nones’ in America: Who They Are and What They Believe* (Jan. 24, 2024):<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/>.

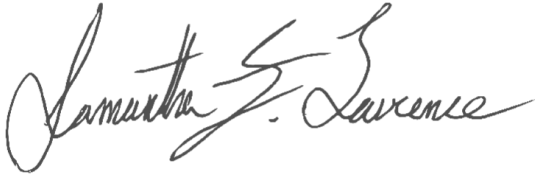
² Samuel J. Abrams, *Perspective: Why even secular people should worry about Gen Z’s lack of faith*, Deseret News (Mar. 4, 2023), www.deseret.com/2023/3/4/23617175/gen-z-faith-religious-nones-civic-life-volunteers-charity.

³ 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/.

media, they may be e-mailed to records@ffrf.org. If I can clarify or assist in the fulfillment of this request, please contact me at slawrence@ffrf.org.

I appreciate your time and attention to this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Samantha F. Lawrence". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "S" and a distinct "F".

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

Enclosure