

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

April 5, 2024

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: michele.morris@ucps.k12.nc.us

Michele E. Morris
Legal Counsel
Union County Public Schools
400 N. Church Street
Monroe, NC 28112

Re: Religious Promotion on Social Media

Dear Ms. Morris:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional concern that was recently reported in Union County Public Schools. We appreciated your swift response to our January 10, 2024 letter regarding school-sponsored prayer at Parkwood Middle School. I hope that we can quickly resolve this concern as well.

A concerned local community member has reported that Sardis Elementary School recently promoted a religious “prayer walk” event on its official Facebook page. On March 13, 2023, the school shared a post from a religious organization regarding a prayer walk that took place at the school. The group, Heart for Monroe, posted:

God is so good! What an incredible night of prayer at Sardis Elementary School!
A very special thank you to all those that came out from Sardis Elementary School, First Baptist Church of Indian Trail, Shiloh Baptist Church, Euto Baptist Church, and our community.
Please continue to lift up the prayer requests mentioned tonight.



The school included the message, “Thank you for the special prayer walk night.” Please see the enclosed screenshot.

We write to ask that the District cease using its official social media channels to promote religious events and messages in the future. We also ask that religious groups not be given special access to District schools in the future. It appears that the District’s facility use policy does not allow rental of school hallways or grant the type of school access that was given to the organizers of this religious event.

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); *McCollum v Bd. of Ed.*, 333 U.S. 203 (1948). Favoring religion is exactly what a school district does when it promotes religious events and messages using its official social media pages. Promoting religious events demonstrates that the District favors religion over nonreligion, and Christianity over all other faiths. This “[s]chool sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible because it sends 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 Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309-310 (2000) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring)). It also conflicts with personal religious and nonreligious views of many District students and families, including the nearly one in three Americans who are religiously unaffiliated.¹ At least a third of Generation Z (those born after 1996) have no religion², with a recent survey revealing almost half of Gen Z qualify as “nones” (religiously unaffiliated).³

The Supreme Court has described the power of social media sites as “the principal sources for knowing current events, checking ads for employment, speaking and listening in the modern public square, and otherwise exploring the vast realms of human thought and knowledge.” *Packingham v. North Carolina*, 137 S. Ct. 1730, 1737 (2017) (internal citations omitted). School officials must be particularly diligent not to entangle religious beliefs with official pronouncements made in this “modern public square.”

To avoid further Establishment Clause concerns, the District must not promote religious events or post religious messages on its official social media pages. All events held within the District must abide by your facility use policies, and religious groups may not receive special access to school facilities not available to other outside organizations. Please inform us in writing of the steps the District is taking to ensure that it respects the rights of conscience of its students and their families.

Sincerely,



Christopher Line
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

¹Gregory A. Smith, About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated, Pew Research Center (Dec. 14, 2021), www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/.

²Samuel 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

³2022 Cooperative Election Study of 60,000 respondents, analyzed by Ryan P. Burge www.religioninpublic.blog/2023/04/03/gen-z-and-religion-in-2022/.



Sardis Elementary School

March 13 at 5:01 AM · 🌐

Thank you for the special prayer walk night. We appreciate everyone who came out to care for our school community. ❤️



Heart for Monroe is at Sardis Elementary School.

March 12 at 11:12 PM · Monroe, NC · 🌐

God is so good! What an incredible night of prayer at Sardis Elementary School! A very special thank you to all those that came out from [Sardis Elementary School](#), [First Baptist Church of Indian Trail](#), [Shiloh Baptist Church](#), [Euto Baptist Church](#), and our community. Please continue to lift up the prayer requests mentioned tonight.



[#oneheart](#) [#onemission](#) [#forHisglory](#)
[FBCIT Missions](#)