

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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May 3, 2024

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: richard.dennis@elmoreco.com

Richard E. Dennis
Superintendent
Elmore County Schools District
100 H. H. Robison Dr.
Wetumpka, AL 36092

Re: Unconstitutional religious assembly

Dear Superintendent Dennis:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation that recently occurred in the Elmore County School District. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including members in Alabama. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

Multiple District parents have reported that on April 12, 2024, John Eklund, founder and CEO of “Recovery ALIVE” was allowed to deliver a religious assembly for students at Stanhope Elmore High School. Our complainants report that students were called to attend a mandatory “mental health” seminar, but instead, they were subjected to Christian proselytizing by Eklund who preached to students about Jesus and led them in prayer.

Recovery ALIVE is a Christian 12-step program that “prioritizes the Power of Jesus through the Holy Spirit to raise Hope From The Dead. Recovery ALIVE is an organic, living program, representing a living God.”¹ It “harnesses the unchanging truth of Jesus Christ and His word to a living, organic process, in order to reach and ministry to an ever-changing world.”²

In a post about the assembly on Facebook, Eklund explained that he “told Principal Fuller at Stanhope Elmore High School that [he] was amazed at his willingness to let [them] come in and talk about Jesus and Recovery in a large public high school.” He reported that Principal Fuller’s response was, “I’ve been doing this for 26 years. If I’m gonna get in trouble it might as well be for Jesus!” Please see the enclosed screenshot.

We write to ask that you investigate this complaint and take immediate action to ensure that schools administrators and staff are not pushing their religion onto students, or allowing outside speakers to proselytize to students. The District must ensure Eklund, or any other religious speaker, is not allowed to preach to students in the future. Principal Fuller should be reprimanded and additional training should be provided for staff members who allowed this violation of students’ rights to take place. If Principal Fuller

¹ <https://recoveryalive.com/about/>

² *Id.*

is not willing to put district students and his secular position as a public school administrator ahead of his desire to proselytize and push his personal religious beliefs then he should be terminated.

It is unconstitutional to take away instructional time from students to expose them to religious proselytizing. 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).

Moreover, “the preservation and transmission of religious beliefs and worship is a responsibility and a choice committed to the private sphere.” *Santa Fe*, 530 U.S. at 310 (quoting *Lee*, 505 U.S. at 589). In *Lee*, the Supreme Court extended the prohibition of school sponsored religious activities beyond the classroom to all school functions. Thus, taking students out of class to listen to a Christian message as part of the school day is in violation of the Establishment Clause.

FFRF takes these kinds of violations very seriously and we are willing to vigorously defend students' rights. We recently settled a lawsuit against a school district in West Virginia after it similarly allowed a preacher to recruit students during the school day. *See Mays v. Cabell Cnty Bd. of Educ.*, No. 3:22-cv-00085 (S.D. W.Va., Filed Feb. 17, 2022). As part of that settlement, the district agreed to pay nearly \$175,000 in attorney fees.³

Students are a vulnerable and captive audience. The “[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*, 530 U.S. at 309-10 (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring)). Hosting a mandatory religious assembly during the school day excludes those students who are a part of the 49 percent of Generation Z who are religiously unaffiliated.⁴

The District must refrain from coercing students to listen to inappropriate and unconstitutional Christian proselytizing while they are at school in the future. Please notify us in writing of the steps the District is taking to remedy this serious constitutional violation so we may inform our complainants.

Sincerely,



Christopher Line
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

³ffrf.org/news/news-releases/item/42958-ffrf-victory-w-va-families-secure-policy-changes-in-religious-revival-lawsuit

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/.



Elmore/Autauga News

April 13 at 3:27 PM · 🌐



John Eklund

April 12 at 4:12 PM · 🌐

I told Principal Fuller at Stanhope Elmore High School that I was amazed at his willingness to let us come in and talk about Jesus and Recovery in a large public high school 🤯!! His response?

"I've been doing this for 26 years. If i'm gonna get in trouble it might as well be for Jesus!"

This morning, during two assemblies, hundreds of teenagers flooded central court to receive prayer for struggles of value and worth.

A big thank you to [LeslieandTracy Boozer](#) and the [Recovery Alive](#) team @ [Shoal Creek Baptist Church](#) for breathing life into the vision of bringing the Christ centered 12 steps into local public high schools!