

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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April 22, 2024

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: jeff.powell@rpsb.us

Superintendent Jeff Powell
Rapides Parish Schools
P.O. Box 7117
Alexandria, LA 71306

Re: Unconstitutional religious material distribution

Dear Superintendent Powell:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding an unconstitutional religious material distribution at Lessie Moore Elementary School. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 40,000 members across the country, including members in Louisiana. 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 community parent informs us that an outside church—Journey Church—distributed “The Life Book” at Lessie Moore Elementary during school hours on or around April 9, 2024. Our complainant notes that students finished breakfast before the church members handed out The Life Book on school property. The Life Book contained passages from the bible with annotations from fictitious characters who “read along” with the reader. The Life Book contained bible passages and biblical themes throughout including the stories of Jesus and Mary. The Life Book quotes several New Testament passages with citations. The Life book is published by Gideons International. According to its official website, The Life Book’s sole purpose is to “saturat[e] high schools with god’s word.”¹ One portion of the book speaks exclusively about sex and sexuality. Our complainant felt that was inappropriate for their third-grade child. Lessie Moore Elementary teaches students from Pre-K to third grade. We understand administrators instructed students to turn the bibles in later that day.

We ask the District to investigate and ensure that religious groups are not allowed to distribute religious literature on school grounds.

It is inappropriate and unconstitutional for the District to offer the Gideons unique access to students in order to indoctrinate them and distribute religious materials. The District cannot allow its schools to be used as recruiting grounds for religious missions. It is well-settled law that public schools may not show favoritism toward nor 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*

¹ <https://thelifebook.com/youthleaders>.

v. Bd. of Ed., 333 U.S. 203 (1948). By allowing religious representatives special access to distribute religious material to elementary school students, the District displays blatant favoritism for religion over nonreligion and Christianity above all other faiths.

Here, the school allowed one church group to push, present, and distribute one narrow interpretation of Christianity onto young students who are particularly impressionable. Even “The Life Book” website only contemplates its literature going to high school students. Instead, a religious text was given to these young students with the hope that they read it as truth—like everything else they get from school. That is jarring.

Yet more jarring is the explicitly sexual nature of the last section in The Life Book, titled “Relationships and Sex.” This section talks about god’s wish for humans to not engage in premarital sex, both with biblical text and annotations. For instance, one annotation compares premarital sex—and promiscuity—to slavery. One of the fictitious characters writes:

So many of my friends think they are ready for sex. But what do we really know? Are we ready for babies, STDs, and for broken hearts? I have a really good friend who thought she and her boyfriend were ready for sex, so they went ahead and had it. She thought it was love, but found out pretty fast it wasn’t. She gave up her heart to a guy who didn’t really care, and dumped her a few weeks later. But then she figured that since she had already had sex once, it wasn’t a big deal to do it again... and again... and again. That is what being a “slave” means – she couldn’t stop herself even though she hated herself more and more every time she had sex with another guy. That’s why I think God saves sex for marriage – Tay²

Presumably, the school did not screen or otherwise view the nature of the literature being distributed on its campus. Giving a pass to churches on account of them being churches demonstrates a real bias that no other outside group would have. Assuming that churches and their agents are well-meaning and incapable of malicious or otherwise delinquent conduct itself shows a strong unconscious bias toward minority religions and the non-religious. We are pleased the school collected The Life Book after discovering its obscene nature.

But the damage was done. Our complainant notes that their child, who did not take a Life Book, was shown “The Sex Book,” as their peers called it, by their peers. The children have absorbed the content and recollecting the book later that day was too late.

Further, this religious literature distribution needlessly alienates all students and families, such as our complainant and their child. Thirty-seven percent of the American population is non-Christian, including the almost thirty percent who are nonreligious.³ At least a third of

² The Life Book at page 102. <https://thelifebook.com/read>.

³ Gregory A. Smith, *Religious ‘Nones’ in America: Who They Are and What They Believe*, Pew Research Center, Jan. 24, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/>.

Generation Z (those born after 1996) have no religion,⁴ with a recent survey revealing almost half of Gen Z qualify as “nones.”⁵

The District should not maintain a policy whereby any private organization may take advantage of school resources to further its personal goals. FFRF has sought to distribute [its own literature in schools](#) with overly broad distribution policies, and may seek to do so in any school district that maintains an open forum.⁶ If a public school has a policy that allows organizations to distribute religious materials to students, the school cannot discriminate against *any* religious or nonreligious viewpoint. The best solution is a policy that does not allow third-party literature distribution.

In order to respect students’ First Amendment rights, the District must ensure that Lessie Moore Elementary ceases allowing churches to distribute religious literature to students while on school property, during school hours. Please respond in writing with the steps the District is taking to address this constitutional violation. Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,



Hirsh M. Joshi
Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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/.

⁶ See <http://goo.gl/9AIp9s>.