

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

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SENT VIA U.S. MAIL & EMAIL: boozersh@u4sd.org; comms@u4sd.org

Dr. Sheila Boozer
Superintendent
Champaign Unit 4 School District
502 West Windsor Road
Champaign, IL 61820

Re: Unconstitutional organization access & district participation

Dear Superintendent Boozer:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding constitutional violations occurring at Champaign Unit 4 School District schools. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including almost 1,300 members and a chapter in Illinois. 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 member informs us that Youth For Christ's Eastern Illinois chapter is receiving special access to school children within the Unit 4 District. YFC is infamous for its homophobic policies regarding LGBTQ+ Christians.¹ YFC has curated its lunch hour to target underprivileged students with food insecurity. According to a flier it distributed at Franklin STEAM Academy, Youth for Christ Campus Life Lunch Crew "collaborates closely with **the school administration** to identify students who may require social, emotional, and academic support and mentoring." YFC holds lunchtime meetings with these identified children. Please see the enclosed picture of the flier.

Enter our complainant, who personally witnessed one such meeting. This meeting's presentation included topics such as Jesus Christ and putting their trust in God. "Social and emotional instruction," in reality, is code for Christianity and Christian teachings.

Students—including low-income students—have the First Amendment right to be free from religious indoctrination in their public schools. We ask the District to investigate and cease working with YFC to indoctrinate students.

It is a basic constitutional principle that public schools may not show favoritism toward or coerce belief or participation in religion. *See 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);

¹ [https://tacoma.yfc.net/uploads/default/Life_as_a_Leader_\(NEW\)Standards+of+Conduct.pdf](https://tacoma.yfc.net/uploads/default/Life_as_a_Leader_(NEW)Standards+of+Conduct.pdf).

Engel v. Vitale, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *McCullum v. Bd. of Educ.*, 333 U.S. 203 (1948) (**based on a case arising from the Champaign public school system**). Here, YFC uses access to particularly vulnerable school children to promote a religious message that seeks to convert children to Christianity. This unconstitutional message accompanies something they need and do not have access to—lunch. The school cannot allow outside adults to use charity as an excuse to indoctrinate students on school grounds during the school day.

Compounding that violation is the District’s **aiding and abetting** the program; school administrators identify children in need of “social, emotional, and academic” support. The District is referring students who it deems in need of religious counseling to YFC. This practice also disregards the families’ privacy rights. The District actively participates in religious counseling.

YFC’s tactic of combining indoctrination with charity is a common tactic employed by some ministries: Handing over food with a bible or other religious literature. The purpose is to lure disadvantaged individuals into believing that such religion—here Christianity—is responsible for or somehow attached to the cessation of hunger and dawning of prosperity. Here, YFC uses the hunger of particularly vulnerable children to the same effect. By failing to chill YFC’s sectarian inculcation, STEAM Academy invites YFC to target these children. Ultimately, it is the public school’s responsibility to ensure that materials given to children on school property during the school day do not unconstitutionally promote religion.

FFRF lauds the District and STEAM Academy for seeking to partner with local organizations to address student hunger. However, the District must still abide by the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause while doing so. Here, the school allows an outside group to target particularly vulnerable students with a narrow, sectarian message about Jesus Christ that the students must endure if they want their lunch. That is impermissible.

The District allowing outside adults to push their religious views on students on campus during the school day “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*, 530 U.S. at 309–10 (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring)). Non-religious students receiving that message will feel particularly alienated, since 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

Eighty years after infamously violating the separation of church and state, Champaign public schools need not re-enter that spotlight. To comply with the First Amendment the District must ensure it stops aiding and abetting YFC’s proselytizing. YFC must also be directed to refrain from proselytizing during lunch hours. If YFC is unable or unwilling to comply, then the District can no longer partner with them. Further, the District must ensure that all other outside

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

³ Ryan P. Burge, *2022 Cooperative Election Study of 60,000 respondents*, Apr. 3, 2023, <https://religioninpublic.blog/2023/04/03/gen-z-and-religion-in-2022/>.

organizations understand the constitutional duty to adhere to the separation of state and church when interacting with public school students. Please reply in writing with the steps that the District is taking to comply with its First Amendment obligation. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Hirsh M. Joshi".

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

Enclosure



CAMPUS LIFE Lunch Crew

The Youth for Christ Campus Life Lunch Crew program is strategically designed to address two fundamental student needs. Firstly, the program aims to provide supplementary lunch support to students who may not receive an adequate daily meal. This initiative involves procuring food from external vendors to complement the school-provided lunch. Secondly, the Lunch Crew aspires to create a secure environment where students can engage in learning and discussions regarding social and emotional behaviors and needs. It is acknowledged that some students grapple with social and emotional challenges on a daily basis. Therefore, establishing a safe space is imperative, allowing for the exchange of information between the mentors and students.

These objectives are achieved during the students' lunch period. The Lunch Crew team collaborates closely with the school

administration to identify students who may require social, emotional, and academic support and mentoring.

The daily process of the Lunch Crew is straightforward, requiring the school to allocate a space for students to convene with the Lunch Crew Staff during lunchtime. Students will obtain their lunch but, the Lunch Crew staff will provide additional lunch support and introduce the discussion topic for the day.

The desired outcome of the program is to witness a reduction in students struggling with behavioral, academic, social, and emotional issues. We aim to foster an environment where students attending the Lunch Crew meetings feel comfortable discussing their challenges with our mentors.

Willie G. Comer Jr,
Executive Director
www.eciyfc.org/217-356-1176