

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: [singhsmithm@clarke.k12.va.us](mailto:singhsmithm@clarke.k12.va.us),  
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Monica Singh-Smith  
School Board Chair  
Clarke County Public Schools  
317 West Main Street, Suite A  
Berryville, VA 22611

Re: Unconstitutional church partnership

Dear Chair Singh-Smith and School Board members:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional concern with a proposal being considered in Clarke County Public Schools. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with 40,000 members across the country, including more than 900 members in Virginia. 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 Clarke County Public Schools parent has informed us that the District is considering a proposal to establish a “Community Mentorship Program” with Fellowship Bible Church that would allow the church to proselytize to District students. It is our understanding that on August 19, 2024, the church presented its proposal to establish a mentorship program before the school board. We understand that during the presentation, Scott Santmeier, the church’s Pastor of Local Outreach, claimed that the intent of the partnership is not to proselytize, but it is clear from the church’s website that this is not true. The church’s mentoring partnership website includes a list of “RESOURCES TO HELP YOU SHARE JESUS,” and explains that “[a] mentor from Fellowship Bible Church is an Ambassador of Christ in an increasingly difficult world.”<sup>1</sup>

We write to request that the District reject this unconstitutional and inappropriate partnership with Fellowship Bible Church in order to respect the constitutional rights of students and avoid government entanglement with religion. While a mentorship program for students is a laudable District goal, it cannot partner with a church and give them access to convert or recruit its students.

Students have the First Amendment right to be free from religious indoctrination in their public schools. 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

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.fbcva.org/local-outreach>.

(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). By partnering with Fellowship Bible Church and providing its representatives special access to meet, talk to, and mentor students, the District risks displaying clear favoritism towards religion over nonreligion, Christianity over all other faiths, and a preference for Fellowship Bible Church over other churches. Such a partnership would be a particular affront to the 49 percent of Generation Z who are religiously unaffiliated.<sup>2</sup>

This partnership with Fellowship Bible Church would put Clarke County Public Schools in the dubious position of entangling itself with a church, in violation of the Establishment Clause. Clarke County Public Schools must respect that “the preservation and transmission of religious beliefs and worship is a responsibility and a choice committed to the private sphere.” *Santa Fe*, at 310 (quoting *Lee*, at 589). Parents, not public schools, have the right to determine their children’s religious or nonreligious upbringing.

In order to protect students’ First Amendment rights, Clarke County Public Schools should reject the proposal to establish a “Community Mentorship Program” with Fellowship Bible Church. Please respond in writing with the steps the District is taking to address this constitutional violation so that we may inform our complainant. Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Line". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Christopher Line  
Staff Attorney  
Freedom From Religion Foundation

CAL:kjs

Cc: John Lamanna, Superintendent, *via* [lamannaj@clarke.k12.va.us](mailto:lamannaj@clarke.k12.va.us)

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<sup>2</sup> 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/](http://www.religioninpublic.blog/2023/04/03/gen-z-and-religion-in-2022/).