

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

September 6, 2024

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: alan_cosby@ecboe.org

Alan Cosby
Superintendent
Etowah County Schools
401 Broad Street
Gadsden, AL 35901

Re: Unconstitutional Daily Bible Verse Display

Dear Superintendent Cosby:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding another serious constitutional violation occurring in Etowah County Schools. We are still awaiting a response to our December 20, 2023 letter regarding the District soliciting religious organizations to proselytize and attempt to convert its students in exchange for donations. We look forward to a response to that letter and this new one as well. We would like to work with the District to resolve these matters.

A concerned District community member has reported that [REDACTED] a teacher at Glencoe High School, writes a bible verse on her whiteboard each day for students. She recently posted a video on TikTok where she shows herself posting her daily bible verse.¹ Please see the enclosed screenshot.

We ask that the District investigate this matter and end this daily bible verse display practice in order to protect the rights of students to be free from religious coercion in their public schools.

The District violates the Constitution when it allows its schools to display religious messages, including bible verses. 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). Posting a daily bible verse in the classroom each day displays a clear government favoritism towards religion over nonreligion, and Christianity above all other faiths.

Courts have continually held that public school districts may not display religious messages or iconography in public schools. *See, e.g., Stone v. Graham*, 449 U.S. 39 (1980) (ruling that the Ten Commandments may not be displayed on classroom walls); *Lee v. York County*, 484 F.3d 689 (4th Cir. 2007) (ruling that a teacher may be barred from displaying religious messages on classroom bulletin boards); *Washegesic v. Bloomingdale Pub. Schs.*, 33 F.3d 679 (6th Cir. 1994) (ruling that a painting of Jesus may not be displayed in a public school).

¹ [REDACTED]

Religion is a divisive force in public schools. The Supreme Court has repeatedly noted that “[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.’” *Id.* at 309 (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring)). Additionally, this practice needlessly alienates those students who are a part of the 49 percent of Generation Z who are religiously unaffiliated.²

In recognition of the District’s constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion, please end this daily bible verse display practice, and ensure that all Etowah County teachers understand their constitutional obligation not to promote their personal religious beliefs in the classroom. Please reply in writing with the steps the District is taking to remedy this constitutional violation so that we may inform our complainant. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

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

Enclosure

² 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/.

