

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

November 6, 2024

SENT VIA FAX & U.S. MAIL: (616) 878-3283

Jason Pierson
Board President
Byron Center Board of Education
8542 Byron Center Ave SW
Byron Center, MI 49315

Re: Promotion of Religion by School Board Member

Dear President Pierson and members of the Board:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding concerns over a school board member promoting their personal religious beliefs using their position on the board. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with 40,000 members across the country, including more than 1,000 members in Michigan. 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 District community member has reported that Thalia Tilma has been using her position on the Board to promote her personal religious beliefs and conversion therapy to students and parents at Board meetings. Specifically, our complainant reports that during a board meeting on October 7, 2024, Tilma told a story about convincing a child not to transition that included references to her belief in the the devil and her allegiance to Jesus:¹

I one hundred percent love all kids, and that's why I serve on this school board. And Jesus does too. So, I'm just gonna say that. One time I had a wonderful part of a ministry that prays with kids and I had a wonderful opportunity to pray with a little girl. And there was many that had prayed before her so I can't claim. I just got to do this once...She had already, you know, made the decision to start a transition and she had cut her hair and was wearing boy clothes and binding her breasts and stuff. She was talking with me and another gal who wanted to pray with her about how she was feeling and she was talking about these thoughts that she was having. I just felt led to reach over and like hold her hand and I just told her...those thoughts that you're having are not your own.

She explained that she later told the child, "You can tell the devil to shut up and that's okay." She continued, "I'm a big believer the devil doesn't play nice so I don't play nice with him." She further elaborated that attendees need to rally around children in love and tell them "We accept you. So does Jesus, and you know, Jesus came to set the captives free. So if He's in us, we can do that for them."

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/live/XKsUKcDtA1M>.

While board members are free to promote their personal religious beliefs however they wish in their personal capacities outside of the school board, as government officials they cannot be allowed to impose their personal religious beliefs on district students, parents, and employees in their capacity as board members. We ask that you ensure that board member Tilma, and other members of the board, refrain from promoting their personal religious beliefs at board meetings in the future.

Our Constitution’s Establishment Clause—which protects Americans’ religious freedom by ensuring the continued separation of religion and government—dictates that the government cannot in any way show favoritism toward religion. As the Supreme Court has put it, “the First Amendment mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.” *McCreary Cty. v. ACLU*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985); *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15-16 (1947).

Moreover, “the preservation and transmission of religious beliefs and worship is a responsibility and a choice committed to the private sphere.” *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 310 (2000) (quoting *Lee*, 505 U.S. at 589). Allowing a board member to use her position to promote her personal religious beliefs in official board communications violates these constitutional limits on government religious coercion and sends a message that the government supports religion in general and Christianity specifically. By proselytizing through her school board position, Tilma sends a religious message on behalf of the Board that is “impermissible because it 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 Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 530 at 309-10 (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (O’Connor, J., concurring)).

While Tilma is certainly free to express her religious beliefs in her private capacity outside of her role as a board member, it is unconstitutional for school board members to push their personal religious beliefs during school board meetings. We request that all board members refrain from discussing their religious beliefs in their capacity as board members in order to uphold the rights of conscience embodied in our First Amendment. Please provide us in writing at your earliest convenience with an assurance that this won’t be an issue in the future.

Sincerely,



Christopher Line
Legal Counsel
Freedom From Religion Foundation