

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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January 15, 2025

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: messingert@newtoncsd.org

Superintendent Tom Messinger
Newton Community School District
1302 First Avenue West
Newton, IA 50208

Re: Promoting religion on social media

Dear Superintendent Messinger:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation occurring in the Newton Community School District. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with about 40,000 members across the country, including members in Iowa. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

On November 26, 2024, the Newton HS Girls Basketball team posted a “hype video” on its official Facebook account.¹ While most of the video is unproblematic, at the beginning of the video, the entire team is seemingly praying with the head coach present.

We ask the District to investigate, delete the aforementioned post, and counsel its staff to refrain from praying with students and promoting religious worship using official District channels, including social media.

It is a basic constitutional principle 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 Educ.*, 333 U.S. 203 (1948). Posting videos of religious worship on official social media accounts promotes religion over nonreligion and Christianity over all other faiths. Promoting religious worship on social media sends the message to minority religious and nonreligious citizens “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. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309–10 (2000) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring)).

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/share/v/18Z24ZcT72/?mibextid=wwXIf>.

Government religious speech promoting Christian viewpoints marginalizes and excludes non-Christian students, teachers, and parents whose religious beliefs are inconsistent with the message being promoted by the school staff. This includes the thirty-seven percent of non-Christian Americans, the almost thirty percent of nonreligious Americans,² or almost half of Gen Z who are “nones” (religiously unaffiliated).³

To respect the First Amendment rights of its students, the District must not affiliate religious activities with its athletics programs through its official social media, and any student religious activities must be completely student-initiated and student-led, with no involvement from staff. Please inform us in writing of the steps the District is taking to address these constitutional concerns.

Sincerely,



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

² 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/>.

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