

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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June 25, 2025

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: garretttam@bedfordk12tn.net

Tammy Garrett
Superintendent
Bedford County Schools
500 Madison Street
Shelbyville, TN 37160

Re: Unconstitutional religious class

Dear Superintendent Garrett:

I am writing again on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding constitutional concerns with a proposed bible class at Community High School. As you may recall, FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 42,000 members across the country, including more than 500 members and a local chapter in Tennessee. We would appreciate a response to our letter dated May 2, 2025 in addition to this one.

A concerned District parent reported that Community High School has proposed the addition of a class called “Bible” to its coursework offerings for the 2025-26 school year. Please see the enclosed screenshot of an email from CHS counselors.

We write to urge the District to investigate and instruct Community High School not to adopt this new course. In the event that it does so, however, the District must ensure that it is not indoctrinating students by providing a curriculum that treats bible stories as historical fact or a source of moral instruction.

It is a fundamental principle of Establishment Clause jurisprudence that public schools may not advance, prefer, or promote religion. *See generally, 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). Any materials provided to students by the District that treat the bible as historical fact would violate the principle that “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).

The Supreme Court has recognized that “[f]amilies entrust public schools with the education of their children, but condition their trust on the understanding that the classroom will not purposely be used to advance religious views that may conflict with the private beliefs of the student and his or her family.” *Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 U.S. 578, 584 (1987) (finding unconstitutional a statute allowing the teaching of creationism, a religious belief, in classrooms). If the District turns a blind eye to any impermissible religious curriculum, it becomes complicit in a constitutional violation and breach of trust.

Public schools may not provide religious instruction. In the seminal Supreme Court case on this issue, *McCollum v. Bd. of Educ.*, 333 U.S. 203 (1948), the Court held that that bible classes in public school

were unconstitutional. Other federal courts have similarly ruled that religious instruction is unconstitutional. In FFRF's lawsuit against religious instruction in Rhea County, Tennessee, the Court said, "This is not a close case. Since 1948, it has been very clear that the First Amendment does not permit the State to use its public school system to 'aid any or all religious faiths or sects in the dissemination of their doctrines.'" *Doe v. Porter*, 188 F. Supp. 2d 904, 914 (E.D. Tenn 2002) (quoting *McCullum*, 333 U.S. at 211), *aff'd*, 370 F.3d 558 (6th Cir. 2004). The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals struck down a "Bible Literature" course, finding that the content of the course, which included "rote memorization of the bible," was unconstitutional. *Hall v. Bd. of Sch. Comm'rs of Conecuh Cty.*, 656 F.2d 999, 1003 (5th Cir. 1981). In a Mississippi case, the court found that "A Biblical History of the Middle East" class violated the Establishment Clause. *Herdahl v. Pontotoc Cty. Sch. Dist.*, 933 F. Supp. 582 (N.D. Miss. 1996).

FFRF takes these violations seriously and we are willing to vigorously defend students' rights. We settled a lawsuit against a West Virginia school district after it allowed "Bible in the Schools" classes for elementary students. *See FFRF et al. v. Mercer Cnty. Bd. of Educ.*, No. 1:17-cv-00642 (S.D. W.Va., Filed Jan. 18, 2017). As part of that settlement, the district assumed responsibility for \$225,000 in costs and attorney fees.¹ Bedford County Schools can avoid the risk of a similar fate by rejecting its Bible class proposal.

Were it to adopt a bible curriculum, the District would display clear favoritism for religion over nonreligion and Christianity above all other faiths. This not only violates students' First Amendment rights, it needlessly excludes and marginalizes those students who are a part of the 49 percent of Generation Z who are religiously unaffiliated.²

We request that the District immediately investigate and reject the proposed bible curriculum. If it decides to adopt the class anyways, the District must take appropriate action to ensure that all materials and curriculum provided by the District maintain a completely neutral perspective in order to comply with the requirements of the Constitution. Please inform us in writing of what action the District is taking to address this constitutional concern.

Sincerely,



Kyle Steinberg
Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure

¹ <https://ffrf.org/legal/court-victories/ffrf-parent-sue-to-end-75-years-of-bible-classes-in-w-v-a-school-system/>.

² 2022 Cooperative Election Study of 60,000 respondents, analyzed by Ryan P. Burge, <https://religioninpublic.blog/2023/04/03/gen-z-and-religion-in-2022/>.

Below is the corrected link: I apologize for the error.

Good Morning 9th, 10th, and 11th graders,

We are possibly adding 1-3 more courses for next school year:

- Bible
- Creative Writing: Song Writing
- ACT Prep
- Speech (Local Dual Credit)

Please complete the following survey ASAP.

<https://forms.office.com/r/zziTLM7XQk>

Parents/Guardians: Please tell your child to check their student e-mail or Skyward for this link! Thank you for your help. Only students or BCS employees can access the link.

If students are interested, then we will call them to our office to discuss their course requests for next school year. We will only call students who select, yes. To clarify, these courses are not guaranteed, there needs to be enough interest.

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School Counselors:

