

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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March 30, 2026

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: newsomem@calvertnet.k12.md.us

Marcus J. Newsome
Interim Superintendent
Calvert County Public Schools
1305 Dares Beach Rd.
Prince Frederick, MD 20678

Re: Official school-sponsored prayer box

Dear Interim Superintendent Newsome:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation reported in Calvert County Public Schools. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 41,000 members across the country, including more than 800 members in Maryland. 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 community member has reported that Patuxent High School has a prayer box at the front office of the school. The box has Matthew 11:28 written on the top along with a Latin cross. Please see the enclosed photo.

We ask that the District immediately investigate and remove this school-sponsored prayer box.

Public schools may not show favoritism toward or coerce belief or participation in religion. *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2000) (ruling that student-led prayer at a public high school's football games violated the First Amendment); *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); *McCullum v Bd. of Ed.*, 333 U.S. 203 (1948). "It is beyond dispute that, at a minimum, the Constitution guarantees that government may not coerce anyone to support or participate in religion or its exercise." *Lee*, at 587. Teachers and administrators may not encourage student prayer.

The District has a duty to ensure that its teachers and administrators are not using their positions to promote their personal religious beliefs to students. Certainly, "a school can direct a teacher to 'refrain from expressions of religious viewpoints in the classroom and like settings.'" *Helland v. S. Bend Comm. Sch. Corp.*, 93 F.3d 327 (7th Cir. 1993) (quoting *Bishop v. Arnov*, 926 F.2d 1066, 1077 (11th Cir. 1991)). 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). Parents, not public school staff, have the constitutional right to guide their children’s religious or nonreligious upbringing.

It doesn’t matter whether students or staff support the seemingly school-sponsored prayer box or wouldn’t be offended by a school-sponsored prayer box. As the Supreme Court has said, “fundamental rights may not be submitted to vote; they depend on the outcome of no elections.” *Santa Fe*, 530 U.S. at 304–05 (quoting *W. Va. Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624, 638 (1943)). “The very purpose of a Bill of Rights was to withdraw certain subjects from the vicissitudes of political controversy, to place them beyond the reach of majorities and officials and to establish them as legal principles to be applied by the courts.” *Barnette*, 319 U.S. at 638. The District has a constitutional duty to remain neutral toward religion. By having an official, school-sponsored prayer box, Patuxent High School, and thus the District, abridges that duty and needlessly marginalizes those students and community members who are among the thirty-eight percent of Americans who are non-Christian,¹ including the 43 percent of Generation Z who are nonreligious.²

In order to comply with the First Amendment, the District must remove the prayer box from the school and refrain from encouraging students to participate in religious activities in the future. Please respond in writing with the steps the District is taking to address this matter so that we may inform our complainant. Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

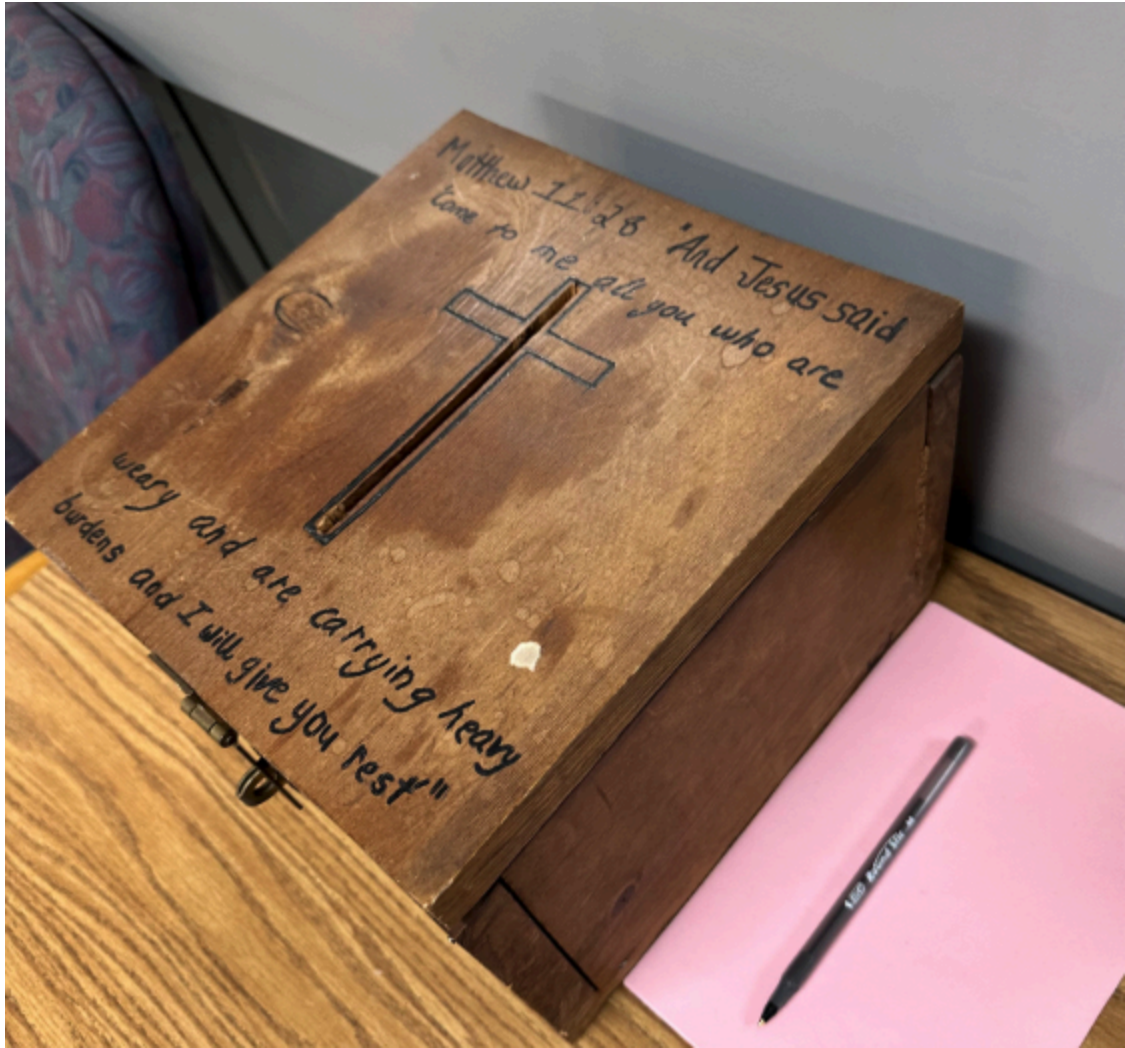


Charlotte R. Gude
Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure

¹ Pew Research Center (2024), <http://bit.ly/3W6Cl3m>.

² Pew Research Center (2024), <http://bit.ly/48Drzce>.



Matthew 11:28 'And Jesus said
Come to me all you who are

weary and are carrying heavy
burdens and I will give you rest"