

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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June 3, 2026

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: wsanderson@bishopbrooks.com

William Sanderson
Bishop Brooks, LLC
2101 Clinton Ave. W., Ste. 402
Huntsville, AL 35805

Re: Unconstitutional elementary school religious club (Madison City Schools)

Dear Attorney Sanderson:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a violation occurring in Madison City Schools (“the District”). As the District may recall from past letters, FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 41,000 members across the country, including members in Alabama. If you are no longer counsel for the District, please advise.

A concerned District parent reports that Madison Elementary School is allowing a District employee, Coach Austin Sanders, to organize and run a Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) club for elementary students. The parent who contacted us states that the elementary school’s principal, Wendy Pharo, advertised the club using an official school communication sent to parents. The May 12th communication from Principal Pharo told parents that Coach Sanders is starting an FCA club at the elementary school next school year, and the message invited parents to attend a “planning kickoff” for the FCA club. According to a flyer for the club, students will unite their “passions, faith and athletics to impact the world for Jesus Christ” if they join FCA.

Additionally, on May 13th Coach Sanders sent a communication to parents via what appears to be an official District platform to again advertise FCA and encourage parents to send their children to the “first FCA huddle” in the elementary school’s gym. Coach Sanders’ communication makes it clear that he is the one starting the club at Madison Elementary School, not students. The parent that contacted us expressed concerns that elementary aged students are likely to view the FCA as a “school-endorsed religious activity.” Please see the enclosed screenshots.

We ask that the District investigate and disband the Madison Elementary School FCA immediately.

As the District is aware, 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); *McCullum v. Bd. of Ed.*, 333 U.S. 203 (1948). It is inappropriate and unconstitutional for an elementary school to organize, lead, or encourage student participation in a religious club like the FCA, especially when that club is clearly run by an adult staff member and not students. The enclosed emails and flyer, taken together, show that Coach Sanders is running this club, not elementary school students. Elementary students are especially impressionable, as recognized by the Supreme Court in this constitutional context. *See Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. at 593 (“Research in psychology supports the common assumption that adolescents are often susceptible to pressure from their peers towards conformity, and that the influence is strongest in matters of social convention.”).

Students have the First Amendment right to be free from religious indoctrination in their public schools. While the Equal Access Act protects students’ right to form religious clubs in *secondary schools*, it does not apply to elementary schools. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a) (emphasis added). Elementary students are too young to truly run

a club entirely on their own initiative without input from school staff or outside adults. The Establishment Clause prohibits school employees from organizing or leading a religious club for students and therefore prohibits religious clubs in elementary schools. Any claims that this FCA club is “student-led” are at best naive and at worst dishonest. Young children cannot practically initiate, organize, and run an FCA club on their own, meaning adults are the ones truly behind the club, and communications from Coach Sanders and Principal Pharo shows that this club is adult-run.

Finally, the school’s actions needlessly alienate and exclude students and families who are non-Christian, including the more than a third of Americans who are non-Christian,¹ and the 43 percent of Generation Z who are nonreligious.² Madison Elementary School should strive to be welcoming and inclusive of all students, not just those who subscribe to a particular brand of Christianity.

We request that Madison City Schools immediately investigate this matter and ensure that the staff-led Madison Elementary School FCA club is disbanded. The school cannot violate students’ First Amendment rights by organizing, leading, and promoting a religious club for elementary school children. Please respond in writing with the steps the school is taking to remedy this constitutional violation and so we may inform the parent who contacted us. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Samantha F. Lawrence". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Samantha" and last name "Lawrence" clearly legible.

Samantha F. Lawrence
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

SFL:trm

Enclosures

¹ Pew Research Center (2024), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/>.

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



Fellowship of Christian Athletes

Madison Elementary School

Wendy Pharo

May 12 at 5:00 PM

Parents,
Coach Sanders will be starting a Future Christian Athletes club next year and is planning a kickoff for this Thursday in the Media Center. If your student would like to attend the kickoff, the information is below. Click [this link](#) for more information about the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

A colorful poster for the FCA kickoff event. At the top left, it says "MADISON ELEMENTARY" in a blue banner. In the center, "FCA" is written in large, bold, green letters. Below this, a red text box states: "FCA FOCUSES ON SERVING LOCAL COMMUNITIES AROUND THE GLOBE BY ENGAGING, EQUIPPING AND EMPOWERING COACHES AND ATHLETES TO UNITE, INSPIRE AND CHANGE THE WORLD THROUGH THE GOSPEL." To the right of this text is a circular logo with a cross and the letters "FCA". Below the main text, there is an illustration of four people sitting around a table, and a photograph of a group of students cheering. To the right of the photo, a green speech bubble says: "UNITE YOUR TWO PASSIONS, FAITH AND ATHLETICS, TO IMPACT THE WORLD FOR JESUS CHRIST." At the bottom left, a yellow speech bubble contains the text: "THURSDAY THE 14TH 7:10 AM-7:40 AM Located in the MES library". At the very bottom, a small blue box contains the URL: "https://www.fca.org/what-is-fca". The poster is decorated with various sports-related icons like a basketball, a football, and a tennis ball, as well as abstract shapes and confetti.

MADISON ELEMENTARY

FCA

FCA FOCUSES ON SERVING LOCAL COMMUNITIES AROUND THE GLOBE BY ENGAGING, EQUIPPING AND EMPOWERING COACHES AND ATHLETES TO UNITE, INSPIRE AND CHANGE THE WORLD THROUGH THE GOSPEL.

UNITE YOUR TWO PASSIONS, FAITH AND ATHLETICS, TO IMPACT THE WORLD FOR JESUS CHRIST.

THURSDAY THE 14TH
7:10 AM-7:40 AM
Located in the MES library

<https://www.fca.org/what-is-fca>

Austin Sanders

May 13 at 3:49 PM

Hello parents, we are having our first FCA huddle meeting tomorrow morning, the 14th, in the MES gym from 710-735! All students are welcome and it is free to attend! FCA stands for "fellowship of Christian athletes" and they are "a non-denominational Christian sports ministry that focuses on Coaches, Campus, Camp and Community ministry." We will have 2 guest speakers tomorrow morning and I am so excited to get this started at Madison Elementary!

See everyone tomorrow morning!