

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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May 29, 2026

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: rhetherton@zps.org

Rod Hetherton
Superintendent
Zeeland Public Schools
183 W. Roosevelt Ave.
Zeeland, MI 49464

Re: Unconstitutional proselytizing in elementary school

Dear Superintendent Hetherton:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding unconstitutional religious instruction reported in Zeeland Public Schools. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 41,000 members across the country, including over 1,100 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 community member reports that a Spanish immersion teacher at Lincoln Elementary School displays multiple religious messages and religious books. This includes displays of Joshua 1:9 in Spanish, the 10 Commandments in Spanish, John 14:6 in Spanish, the Book of Psalms in Spanish, a box decorated with a cross and the words, “1 John 4:8 anyone who does not love does not know God because God is love,” multiple bibles in the independent reading area, and a “Psalm in Color” coloring book in student work areas. It is unclear whether these materials are also used in lessons or encouraged during independent reading time. Please see the enclosed photos.

We write to request that the District investigate immediately and ensure that teachers are not infusing their religious beliefs with their lessons. We also ask that the District remove any religious displays from classrooms in order to protect students’ First Amendment rights.

Students have the First Amendment right to be free from religious indoctrination in their public schools. It is well settled that 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); *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 Educ.*, 333 U.S. 203 (1948). Here, this teacher is crossing the constitutional line and abusing their position in order to display biblical scripture, tell students that “God is love” and promote Christianity to young students.

The District has an obligation under the law to ensure its teachers are not violating the rights of its students by proselytizing or using their position to push their personal religious beliefs. 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 teachers, have the constitutional right to determine their children's religious or nonreligious upbringing.

The Supreme Court's decision in *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* did not overturn the above cited cases and does not apply here. In *Kennedy*, the Court held that a high school football coach's quiet, private post-game prayer was constitutional. 597 U.S. 507, 513–14 (2022). Throughout its opinion, the Court repeatedly stressed that the coach quietly prayed alone. *Id.* (the coach "offered his prayers quietly while his students were otherwise occupied."). The prayers "were not publicly broadcast or recited to a captive audience. Students were not required or expected to participate." *Id.* at 542. In contrast, here this teacher has blatantly religious books and displays in the classroom that teach Christianity to a captive audience of young children.

Additionally, courts have continually held that public school districts may not display religious messages or iconography in public schools. *See, e.g., Stone v. Graham*, 449 U.S. 39 (1980) (ruling that the Ten Commandments may not be displayed on classroom walls); *Lee v. York County*, 484 F.3d 689 (4th Cir. 2007) (ruling that a teacher may be barred from displaying religious messages on classroom bulletin boards); *Washegesic v. Bloomington Pub. Schs.*, 33 F.3d 679 (6th Cir. 1994) (ruling that a painting of Jesus may not be displayed in a public school). By permitting the display of religious scripture and iconography, schools violate this basic constitutional prohibition by signalling clear favoritism toward religion over nonreligion, and Christianity over all other faiths. Further, the District unconstitutionally coerces students to read, venerate, and reflect upon religious scripture by displaying bible verses where students have no choice but to view them.

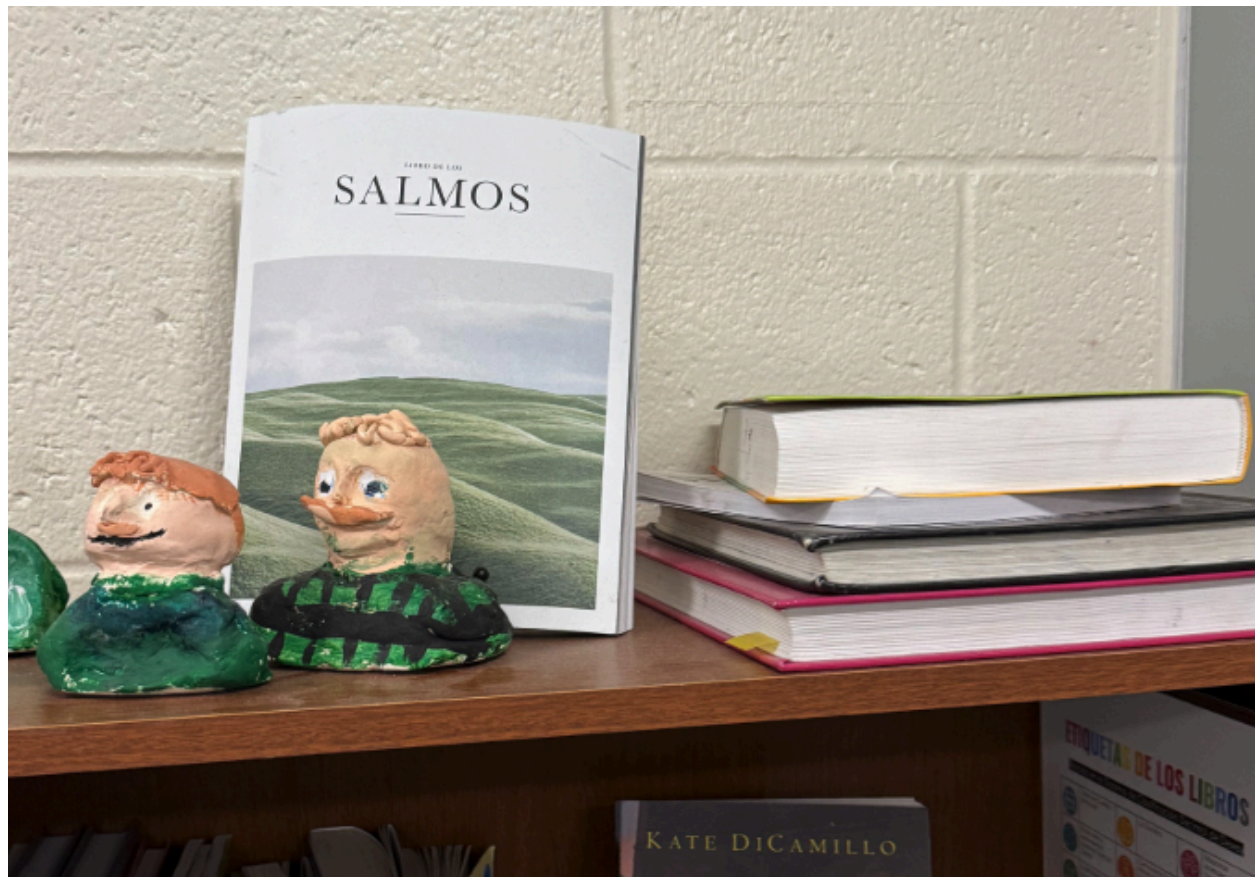
In order to comply with the First Amendment, the District must investigate these matters and ensure that its teachers refrain from using their positions to push their personal religious beliefs onto students. Further, the District must ensure that all religious scripture and iconography is removed from classrooms. Please respond in writing with the steps the District is taking to address this matter so that we may inform the community member who contacted us. Thank you for your time and attention.

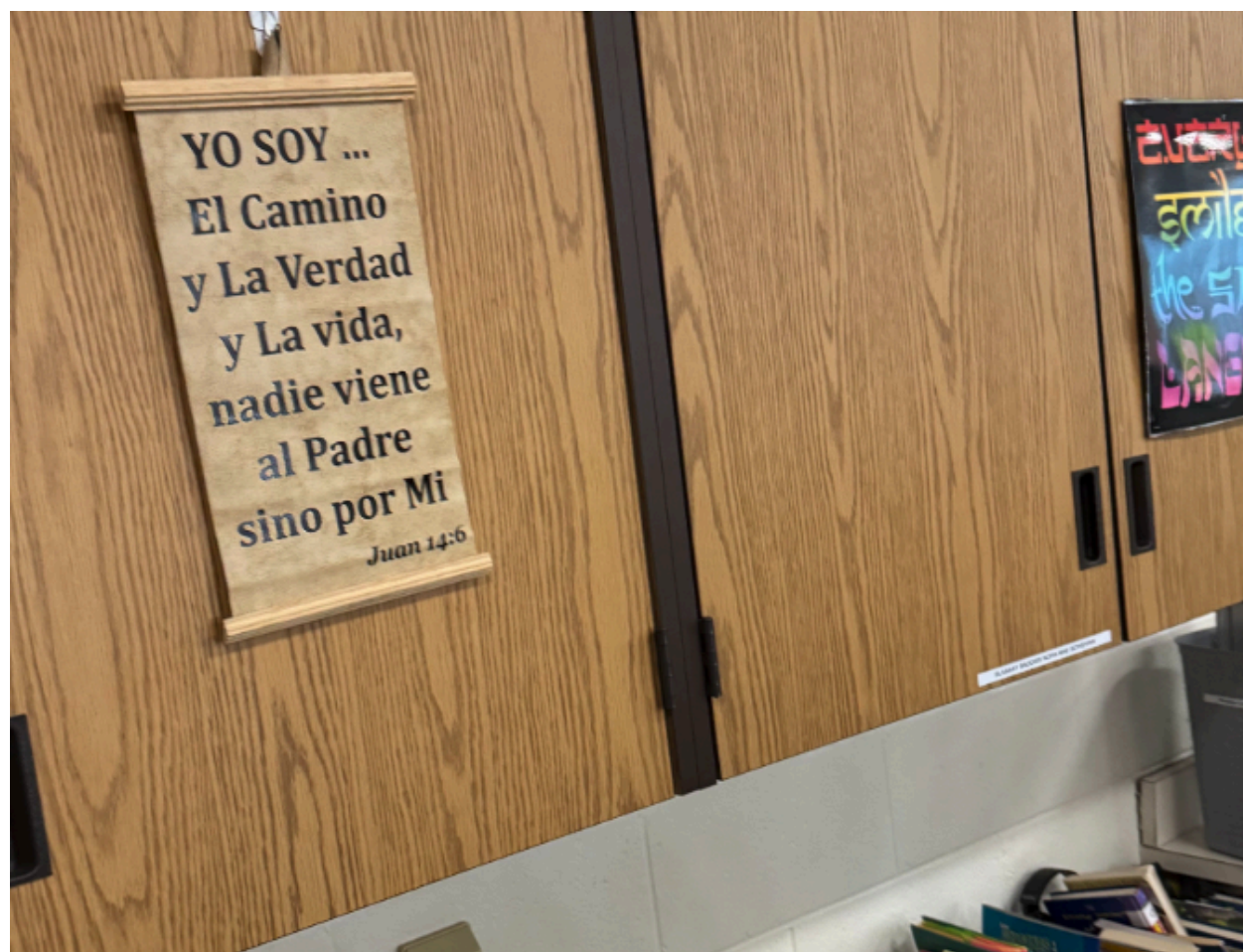
Sincerely,

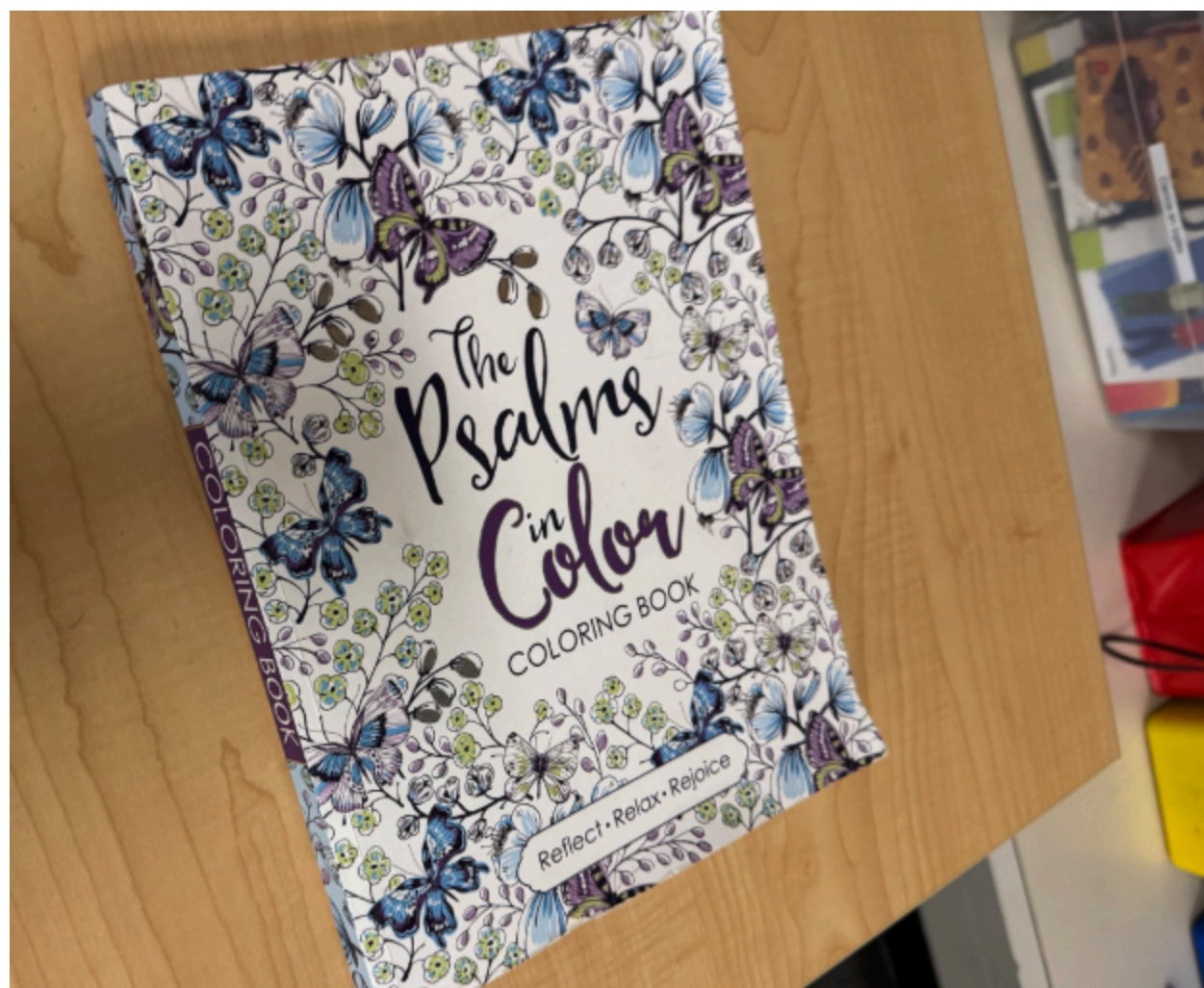
A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Charlotte R. Gude".

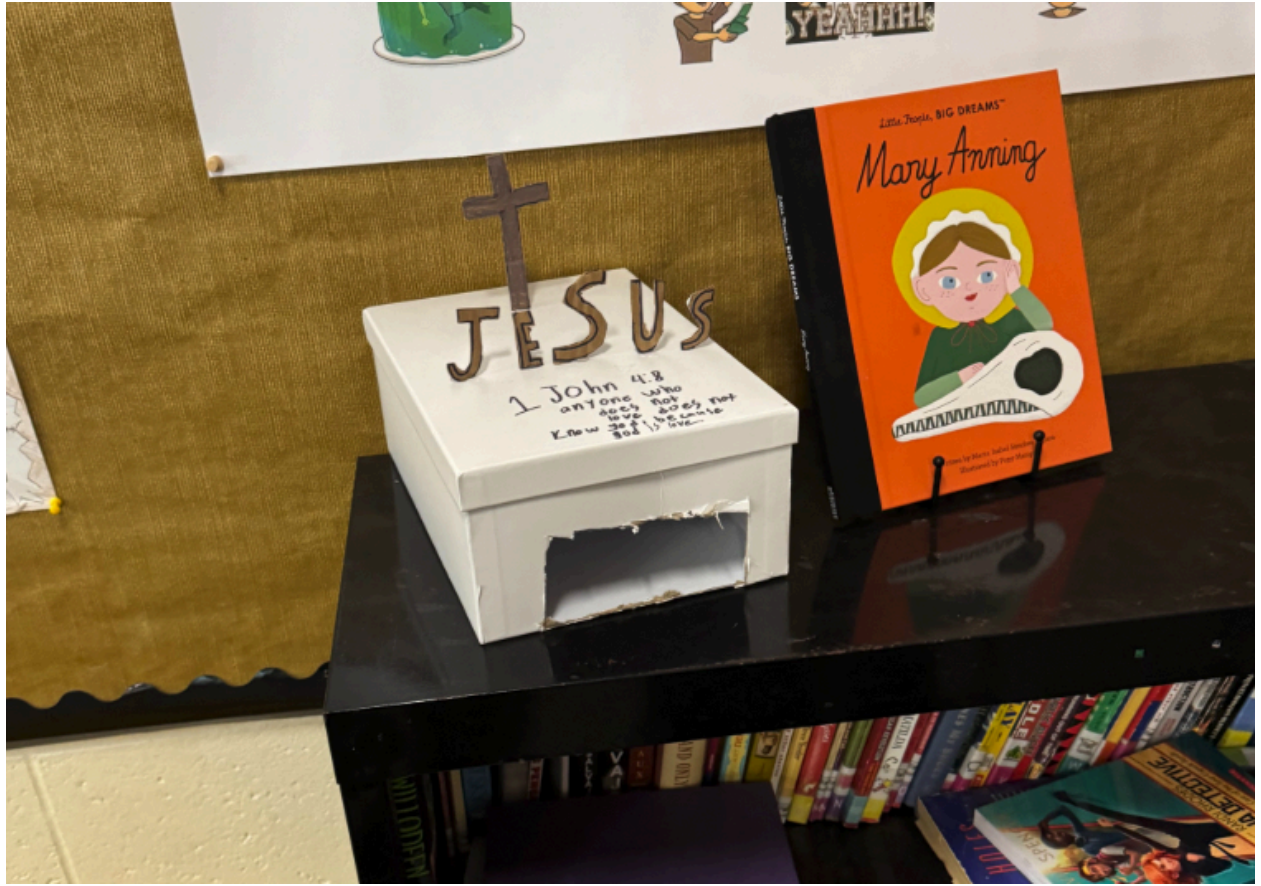
Charlotte R. Gude
Patrick O'Reiley Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosures

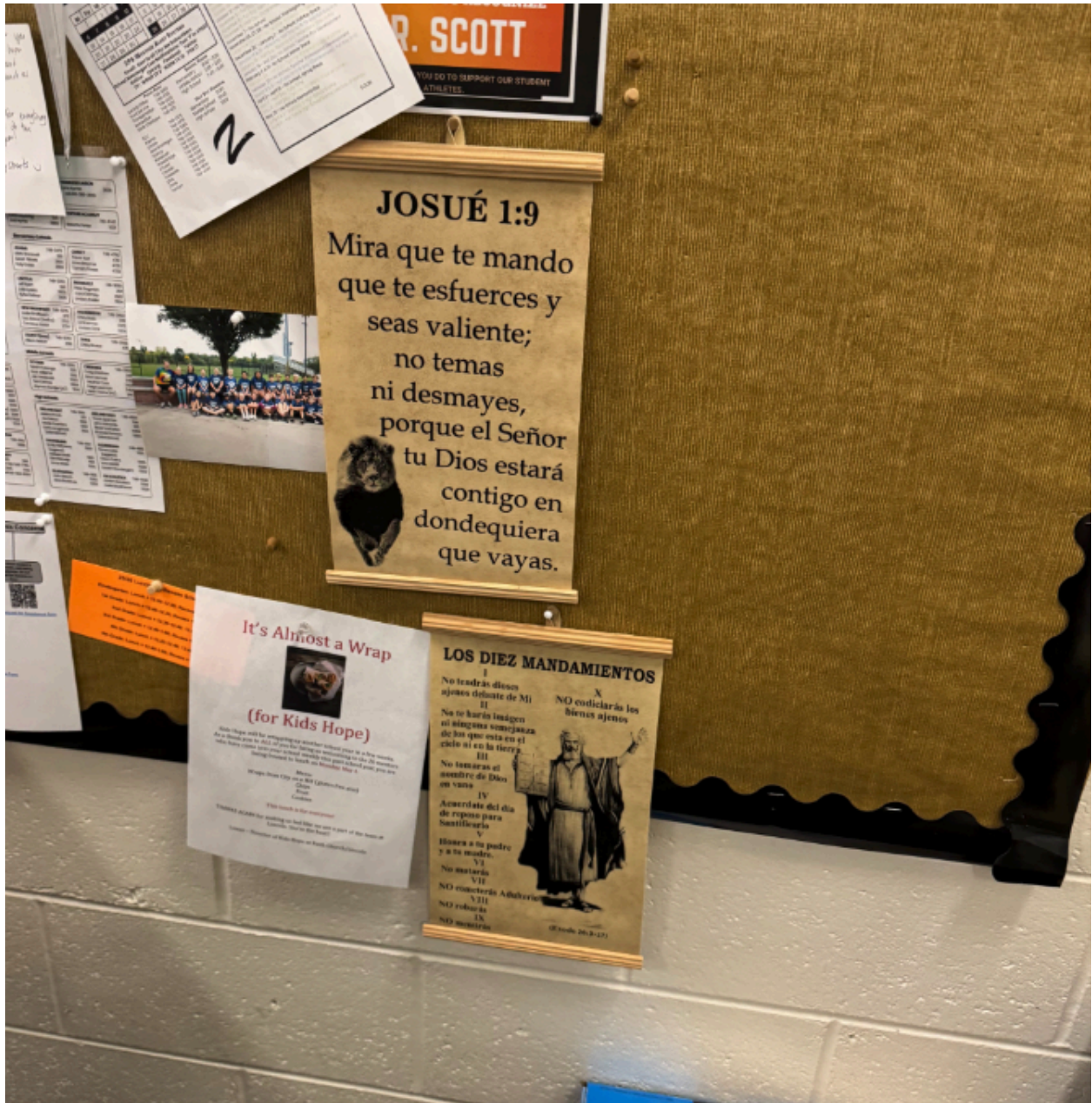












JOSUÉ 1:9

Mira que te mando
que te esfuerces y
seas valiente;
no temas
ni desmayes,
porque el Señor
tu Dios estará
contigo en
dondequiera
que vayas.



It's Almost a Wrap (for Kids Hope)



It's Hope that's wrapping up another school year in a few weeks. For those who are still at school, wrapping up the year means you have some time to relax and enjoy the summer. For those who are already home, it means you have some time to relax and enjoy the summer. It's Hope that's wrapping up another school year in a few weeks. For those who are still at school, wrapping up the year means you have some time to relax and enjoy the summer. For those who are already home, it means you have some time to relax and enjoy the summer.

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LOS DIEZ MANDAMIENTOS

- I No tendrás dioses ajenos delante de Mí
- II No te harás imagen ni ninguna semejanza de lo que está en el cielo ni en la tierra.
- III No tomarás el nombre de Dios en vano
- IV Acuérdate del día de reposo para santificarlo
- V Honra a tu padre y a tu madre.
- VI No matarás
- VII No cometerás adulterio
- VIII No robarás
- IX No mentarás
- X NO codiciarás los bienes ajenos

