

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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August 4, 2026

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: trent.north@dcssga.org

Superintendent Trent North
Douglas County School System
11490 Veterans Memorial Hwy.
Douglasville, GA 30134

Re: Unconstitutional religious coercion by school administration

Dear Superintendent North:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation reported in the Douglas County School System. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 41,000 members across the country, including over 600 members in Georgia. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

We've received reports from numerous DCSS employees regarding proselytizing that took place at DCSS's mandatory July 28th convocation. Per reports, photographs, and a video provided to FFRF, you sermonized employees in your official capacity as Superintendent throughout the convocation. We're told that during the multi-hour event, you made "numerous remarks about God" and said you believe God sent you to "save Douglas County Schools." You reportedly preached to staff, quoted bible verses, told employees that "We need to learn to trust the Lord," and that "We don't need church just on a Sunday, we need to teach our students to worship any day of the week."

There were also gospel singers who performed religious songs throughout the convocation. The gospel music was reportedly explicitly Christian. Please see the enclosed photographs. Our complainants state that you would sermonize the audience in between gospel songs in order to emphasize the religious points being made. It's our understanding that the entire event was roughly 180 minutes and that about two hours was taken up by gospel music and sermons.

One employee stated that throughout the convocation it "became increasingly more Christian and religious" and that your remarks over the course of the event reminded them of a pastor. They "tried to tune it out" but "became increasingly more uncomfortable." They further explained: "I felt like I wasn't free to get up and leave because every person in the district was there, and I would look rude or bad to them. I felt my employment was in jeopardy if I didn't comply because my school's principal told me that morning that it was a district mandated event, and that I would not be paid if I didn't attend."

Another employee likewise reported that the proselytizing made them “feel uncomfortable” and “left out,” “like the odd ball out because I didn’t conform to [the Superintendent’s] narrative of religion.” They say that they and their spouse are members of a minority faith and that the convocation showed that “this school system is not inclusive.”

A third employee told us that they “felt heavily coerced to participate in a religious service as a condition of [their] employment.” They said: “It’s not fair for us to be forced to sit in a church service during a mandatory meeting.”

It is unconstitutional for public school officials to proselytize employees and promote their personal religious views at required events. DCSS must cease proselytizing and religiously coercing employees going forward.

Public schools may not show favoritism toward or coerce belief or participation in religion. *See 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). In this case, you, and thus DCSS, displayed clear favoritism toward religion over nonreligion, and Christianity over all other faiths, by preaching to employees in your official capacity during the convocation. DCSS further coerced employees to watch a gospel performance and sit through sermons under direct threat of punishment and loss of pay.

It is unconstitutional for a public school district to require employees to observe, listen to, and reflect upon religious music and messaging as part of an official district event. *See McCreary Cnty. v. ACLU*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005); *Wallace*, 472 U.S. at 53; *Epperson*, 393 U.S. at 104; *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15–16 (1947). Moreover, government-sponsored promotion of religion “has the improper effect of coercing those present to participate in an act of religious worship.” *Santa Fe*, 530 U.S. at 312. Requiring employees who are nonreligious or members of minority faiths to make a public showing of their lack of religious belief by not participating in a prayer or else display deference toward a religious sentiment in which they do not believe is coercive, embarrassing, and intimidating.

Further, federal courts have held that trainings and meetings for government employees, such as public school faculty, staff, and administrators, cannot promote religion or coerce employee participation in religious exercise, including prayer. *See Warnock v. Archer*, 380 F.3d 1076 (8th Cir. 2004) (prohibiting public school district from orchestrating or supervising prayers at mandatory teacher meetings and in-service training); *Milwaukee Deputy Sheriff’s Ass’n v. Clarke*, 588 F.3d 523 (7th Cir. 2009) (holding religious speech by a sheriff, bible readings, and distribution of Christian literature during mandatory employee meetings unconstitutional under the Establishment Clause). Similarly, a public school district cannot coerce employees to attend a gospel performance and listen to proselytizing during an official all-staff meeting.

Finally, including religious performances and directing staff to “trust in the Lord” at convocation needlessly marginalizes employees who are nonreligious or members of minority faiths.

Thirty-eight percent of the American population is non-Christian, including the almost 30 percent who are nonreligious.¹ Keeping employee events secular costs nothing, excludes no one, and welcomes everyone.

To comply with the First Amendment and to respect the religious diversity of employees, you and the Douglas County School System must refrain from pushing religion on employees going forward. Please respond in writing with the steps being taken to ensure this constitutional violation does not recur so that we may inform the employees who contacted us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Samantha F. Lawrence". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Samantha F. Lawrence
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure

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

