

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 • MADISON, WI 53701 • (608) 256-8900 • WWW.FFRF.ORG

March 13, 2025

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL & EMAIL:
rosettatrece@hvrsd.org

Rosetta Treece
Superintendent
Hopewell Valley Regional School District
425 S Main St.
Pennington, NJ 08534

Re: Unconstitutional adult-led religious club

Dear Superintendent Treece:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation occurring in Hopewell Valley Regional School District. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 40,000 members across the country, including more than 800 members in New Jersey. 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 District community member has informed us that outside adults are being permitted to enter Timberlane Middle School to lead the school's chapter of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. We understand that the FCA meets on Wednesdays during the lunch period.

We write to ask that you take immediate action to ensure that the FCA chapter at Timberlane Middle School is entirely student-initiated and student-led.

It is well settled that public schools may not show favoritism towards or coerce belief or participation in 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). A public school may not give outside religious representatives special access to students for the purpose of promoting religion and proselytizing students, including leading students in religious activities during school-sponsored club meetings.

Further, the District may not allow outside adults or organizations to lead, organize, or regularly participate in "student" religious clubs. The Equal Access Act dictates the limited extent to which religious clubs may exist in public schools. The EAA requires that "nonschool persons may not direct, conduct, control, or regularly attend activities of student groups." 20 U.S.C. § 4071(c)(5). Any religious student clubs, such as FCA, must be bona fide student clubs that are student-led and student-organized. Outside adults cannot regularly attend FCA activities and any school staff in attendance may only participate in a supervisory capacity. Here, we are informed

that outside adults are regularly participating in, attending, and leading Timberlane FCA activities, all in violation of both the EAA and the First Amendment.

Schools cannot constitutionally allow religious organizations to treat schools as a recruiting ground for their religious mission. The District's practice of allowing outside religious representatives unique access to its students demonstrates unconstitutional favoritism not only for religion over non-religion, but in this case Christianity over all other faiths. The District's actions needlessly alienate and exclude those students who are a part of the 49 percent of Generation Z who are religiously unaffiliated.¹

In order to comply with the Constitution, we ask that the District investigate and ensure that outside adults are not permitted to regularly lead, attend, or participate in student religious clubs, including FCA. Please respond in writing with the steps Hopewell Valley Regional School District is taking to address this matter. Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Madeline Ziegler". The ink is dark and the signature is fluid, with the first and last names being clearly legible.

Madeline Ziegler
Staff Attorney

¹ Ryan P. Burge, *2022 Cooperative Election Study of 60,000 respondents*, Apr. 3, 2023, www.religioninpublic.blog/2023/04/03/gen-z-and-religion-in-2022/.