

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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July 22, 2026

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL & EMAIL: mcquemt@bay.k12.fl.us

Superintendent Mark McQueen
Bay District Schools
1311 Balboa Avenue
Panama City, FL 32401

Re: Unconstitutional religious display

Dear Superintendent McQueen:

I am again writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation reported in the District. We hope to receive a response to this letter and our June 22nd letter about unconstitutional graduation prayers.

A concerned parent reports that Mowat Middle School has a large banner with “God is Love” written on it hanging inside the school’s gym. Please see the enclosed photo of the banner. Besides the religious message, the banner features the school’s official colors, the school’s official “M” and the name of the school’s mascot, indicating that the banner is an official school display. The parent who contacted us states that the “God is Love” banner serves as the backdrop of many school events that take place in the gym, such as award ceremonies. Our parent-complainant first saw the banner in August 2023 and reports that the banner is still hanging in the gym as of May 2026.

Our parent-complainant also explained that:

[The banner] has bothered me for three years. The official M and the Mustangs logo make it feel like the school is endorsing one religion over others. It just hit me that my kids see this religious propaganda every single time they enter that gym. It’s impossible to miss. I am uneasy with the banner being so prominently displayed at a public K-12 school. It makes me distrust the administration and the school’s decisionmakers.

We write to request that the District investigate and ensure that Mowat Middle School immediately removes the “God is Love” banner from its gym.

As the District is aware, public schools may not constitutionally show favoritism toward or coerce belief or participation in religion. Students have the right to be free from school-sponsored indoctrination. *See generally 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). By prominently displaying a banner that says “God is

Love,” along with official school symbols and colors, Mowat Middle School is undeniably signaling clear favoritism toward religion over nonreligion. There is no other reasonable way to interpret this banner other than an official school-sponsored religious pronouncement that a god is real and that “God is Love.” The school is also coercing students to read and reflect upon an overtly religious message every single time they enter their school’s gym.

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 Cnty.*, 484 F.3d 689 (4th Cir. 2007) (ruling that a teacher may be barred from displaying religious messages on classroom bulletin boards); *Washegesic v. Bloomingdale Pub. Schs.*, 33 F.3d 679 (6th Cir. 1994) (ruling that a painting of Jesus may not be displayed in a public school). Mowat Middle School is violating the First Amendment by displaying a school-sponsored banner proclaiming that “God is Love” in its gym where students will inevitably read it.

In order to protect students’ First Amendment rights, Bay District Schools must investigate and ensure that Mowat Middle School immediately takes down the “God is Love” banner and refrains from putting up religious displays in the future. We expect a response in writing with the steps the District is taking to end this constitutional violation so that we may inform the parent who contacted us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Samantha F. Lawrence". The signature is fluid and stylized, with the first and last names being more prominent than the middle initial.

Samantha F. Lawrence
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure

