

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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August 5, 2026

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: nyoung@lodiUSD.net

Superintendent Neil Young
Lodi USD
1305 E. Vine St.
Lodi, CA 95240

Re: Unconstitutional religious display

Dear Superintendent Young:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding an unconstitutional religious display in Lodi USD. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 41,000 members across the country, including over 5,100 members and two chapters in California. 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 parent reports that Mrs. Ashleigh Van Houten, a fourth grade teacher at Erma B. Reese Elementary School, has a cross prominently displayed on her classroom wall in Room 28. Our complainant personally observed this cross at a back to school event on July 29th. The parent who contacted us states that the cross is about 12 to 16 inches tall and is displayed on the wall where students will no doubt see it. Please see the enclosed photograph of the cross. We're told that Mrs. Van Houten told parents that her hobbies include church activities and that she used to teach at a Christian school, further signalling that the cross on her classroom wall is intended to be a religious display.

Our complainant expressed concern "because any child in that classroom who does not follow a Christian based religion has to look at that cross and know their teacher's religion is different than their own," and they "may feel that [Mrs. Van Houten] disapproves of them or does not accept them or their own religious beliefs." They further explained that they're afraid their own child may be treated differently if Mrs. Van Houten finds out that their child is not a Christian.

In order to protect students' First Amendment rights, we ask that the District ensure that Mrs. Van Houten removes the cross from her classroom wall.

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 Ed.*, 333 U.S. 203 (1948). By prominently displaying a cross on her classroom wall where students will inevitably see it, Mrs. Van Houten, and thus the District, signals clear favoritism toward religion over nonreligion and Christianity over all other faiths.

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). Mrs. Van Houten's classroom cross display clearly crosses the constitutional line. The display further coerces her fourth grade students to view and reflect upon an undeniably religious symbol.

Religion is a divisive force in public schools. The Supreme Court has repeatedly noted that "[s]chool sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible because it sends the ancillary message to members of the audience who are nonadherents 'that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.'" *Santa Fe*, at 309 (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O'Connor, J., concurring)). Mrs. Van Houten's classroom cross display needlessly marginalizes students, such as our complainant's child, who are a part of the 43 percent of Generation Z who are religiously unaffiliated.¹

To protect students' First Amendment rights, Lodi USD must investigate and ensure that the cross is removed from Mrs. Van Houten's classroom wall. Please respond in writing with the steps the District is taking to remedy this constitutional violation so that 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 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/48Drzce>.

