

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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August 31, 2026

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: salexander@bergman.k12.ar.us

Superintendent Sarah Alexander
Bergman Public Schools
P.O. Box 1
Bergman, AR 72615

Re: Unconstitutional religious display

Dear Superintendent Alexander:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding an unconstitutional religious display in Bergman Public Schools (“the District”). FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 41,000 members across the country, including members and a chapter in Arkansas. 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 Bergman Elementary School has a religious display up. The display features a Latin cross and “One Nation Under GOD,” written inside the silhouette of the United States. Please see the enclosed photograph of the display taken from the school’s official Facebook page.

The community member who contacted us further explained that: “Seeing [this display] made my heart hurt for the students that are not Christian.”

In order to protect students’ First Amendment rights, we ask that the District ensure that the religious display is removed from Bergman Elementary School.

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 along with the Pledge of Allegiance’s reference to a god, the school sends a message that it favors 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 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).

Here, the “One Nation Under GOD” cross display crosses the constitutional line. The cross is an undeniably Christian symbol. Paired with this single line from the Pledge Allegiance, there is no reasonable way to interpret this display other than as a school-sponsored promotion of Christianity. Further, this display coerces elementary school students to view and reflect upon religious imagery and messaging.

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)). Bergman Elementary School’s display needlessly marginalizes students who are a part of the 43 percent of Generation Z who are religiously unaffiliated.¹

To protect students’ First Amendment rights, Bergman Public Schools must investigate and ensure that this religious display is removed. Please respond in writing with the steps the District is taking to address this constitutional violation so that we may inform the person who contacted us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Samantha F. Lawrence". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Samantha" being more prominent and the last name "Lawrence" following in a similar style.

Samantha F. Lawrence
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure

¹ Pew Research Center (2024), <http://bit.ly/48Drzce>.

< **Bergman Elementary School's post**

