

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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September 24, 2026

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: oneill_timothy@svvsd.org

Attorney Timothy O'Neill
General Counsel
St. Vrain Valley School District
395 S. Pratt Pkwy.
Longmont, CO 80501

Re: Unconstitutional religious school shirts

Dear Attorney O'Neill:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a bible quote on official school athletics shirts in the St. Vrain Valley School District. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with nearly 41,000 members across the country, including more than 1,400 members and two chapters in Colorado. 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 Niwot High School's football program recently gave student-athletes official team T-shirts with a bible verse printed on the back. The shirts have the team's name and logo on the front, and the back features the verse "HERE AM I, SEND ME." This verse is Isaiah 6:8.

It's our understanding that head football coach, Nikolas "Nik" Blume, handed the shirts out to the students and told them they are supposed to wear the shirts to games and on bus rides when not in their jerseys. The parent who contacted us further explained that students were given multiple shirts with the bible verse on them and that the coaching team wears the same shirts while on the sidelines at games, "making the shirt a prominent statement." The parent believes that money the team has fundraised has gone to help pay for the bible verse shirts. Our complainant states that in past years the official team shirts may have also featured bible quotes.

The parent who contacted us states that Coach Blume and other coaching staff did not give students any explanation for why the team's shirts have a bible verse on the back, and it's our understanding that the coaching staff chose the verse. According to our complainant, students were "just given the T-shirt and asked to wear it." Students reportedly felt uncomfortable asking coaching staff about the bible verse and some students did not realize their public school was requiring them to wear a religious message until they googled the verse themselves. It is unclear to students and our complainant what the bible verse has to do with high school football.

Coach Blume's official school district email signature includes a lengthier version of the same verse, further suggesting that he chose the verse for the T-shirts: "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying,

‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’ and I said, ‘Here am I. Send me. Isaiah 6:8.’¹ Please see the enclosed photographs of the shirt and a screenshot of Coach Blume’s email signature.

We’re also informed that the official team social media accounts have posted the bible verse as well. Our complainant states that they believe the team’s account, @niwotcougarfb, is run by coaching staff, with possible help from students. Please see the enclosed screenshot of the verse used as a hashtag in an official team post.

The parent who contacted us explained that the inclusion of a bible verse on official team shirts “made our family feel uncomfortable and, honestly, somewhat indoctrinated.” Their student “felt pressured to publicly wear and display a Bible verse in connection with a team activity at [their] public school, despite the fact that we may not all share the same religious beliefs. What was especially troubling to us was that the particular verse had no clear connection to football . . . It felt less like a message about positive team values and more like a public expression of a specific religious belief that we were expected to participate in.” Our complainant expressed particular concerns about the impact that this could have on Jewish families in the District who do not feel comfortable speaking up.

In order to protect students’ First Amendment rights, we ask that the District ensure that Niwot High School’s football program ceases using team shirts as a way to promote religion and refrains from requiring or encouraging student-athletes to wear team apparel with religious messages on it.

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). Here, the school’s football program has seemingly created official team shirts that feature a bible verse on them, and Coach Blume has made clear that student-athletes are expected to wear the shirts during team events. The design of the shirts coupled with the fact that Coach Blume has the same bible verse in his email signature heavily suggests that the phrase “HERE AM I, SEND ME” on the shirts is meant to promote a religious message. This signals clear school favoritism toward religion over nonreligion, and, in this case, Christianity over other faiths. The inclusion of a bible verse on team clothing also coerces students, such as our complainant’s child, into wearing clothing that promotes a religious sentiment that they may not understand or believe in.

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). Likewise, public schools may not use official school clothing to encourage or require students to read, reflect upon, or support religious messages.

Student-athletes are especially susceptible to unconstitutional religious coercion. Students know that their coaches control their positions on the team, including who plays in each game. When a coach designs team T-shirts featuring a bible verse and instructs students to wear the shirts, student-athletes will no

¹ This translation is from the New International Version of the Bible, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah%206%3A8&version=NIV>.

doubt feel that wearing the religious shirts and going along with the coach's religious views are essential to pleasing their coach and being viewed as a team player. Students are unlikely to speak up against their coach requiring them to wear religious shirts, even if they're uncomfortable. It is unrealistic and unconstitutional to put students to the choice of allowing their school to violate their constitutional rights or openly dissenting at the risk of punishment or retaliation.

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)). Niwot High School football program's religious team shirts needlessly marginalize students who are a part of the 43 percent of Generation Z who are religiously unaffiliated.²

To protect students' First Amendment rights, we ask that St. Vrain Valley School District investigate and ensure that Niwot High School's football program ceases creating school clothing with religious messages and refrains from encouraging or requiring students to wear clothing promoting religious messages. Please respond in writing with the steps the District is taking to address this constitutional violation so that we may inform the parent 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 "Samantha" being the most prominent part.

Samantha F. Lawrence
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosures

² Pew Research Center (2024), <http://bit.ly/48Drzce>.





On Mon, Sep 14, 2026 at 9:59AM Blume, Nikolas <blume_nikolas@svvssd.org> wrote:

You should see a Hudl invite to that email otherwise here is the join code: dfpqxjm

Blessings,

Coach Blume



“Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I. Send me.’”
Isaiah 6:8

Willing to support our program? Donate here: [Niwot Football RevTrak](#)



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7:00 PM

LITTLETON PUBLIC
SCHOOLS STAD

125 2 16

niwotcougarfb Almost. Here.
#DayByDay #WeGetBetterAndBetter
#HereAml #SendMe

August 17