FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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September 24, 2026

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: jasplund@galesburg205.org

John Asplund
Superintendent
Galesburg CUSD #205
940 W. Fremont St.
Galesburg, IL 61401

Re: Religious speaker at public school assembly

Dear Superintendent Asplund:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) concerning a report that Galesburg CUSD #205 permitted a guest speaker to proselytize students. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 40,000 members across the country, including more than 1,400 members in Illinois. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

We are informed that on August 27, 2026, Galesburg Junior Senior High School hosted a guest speaker to present to its students about vaping. The speaker reportedly preached about God and explicitly told the student body that what matters was "most importantly, Jesus." We are informed that some school staff members cheered and clapped in response to the religious statements. This assembly was reportedly mandatory for students to attend.

We ask that the District investigate this matter and ensure that its schools do not allow future guest speakers to abuse their access to public school students to promote religion or proselytize students.

Students have the First Amendment right to be free from religious indoctrination in their public schools, including when attending school-sponsored assemblies. Public schools may not show favoritism toward or coerce belief or participation in religion. *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); *McCollum v. Bd. of Ed.*, 333 U.S. 203 (1948). In *Lee*, the Supreme Court extended the prohibition of school-sponsored religious activities beyond the classroom to all school functions. *Lee*, 505 U.S. 577.

In this case, Galesburg Junior Senior High School violated students' First Amendment rights by permitting a guest speaker to proselytize students. A school assembly is an environment ripe for unconstitutional religious coercion. Students are not likely to feel they can simply leave the assembly without risking disciplinary action, and it is unreasonable to expect students to have to

publicly dissent to their constitutional rights being violated. The school's actions unconstitutionally coerced students into participating in, listening to, and reflecting upon Christian teachings, with the goal of converting students, as part of an official school-sponsored talk.

The school's actions needlessly marginalized District students and staff who are nonreligious, as well as those who believe in minority faiths. The "[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*, 530 U.S. at 309–10 (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O'Connor, J., concurring)). Thirty-eight percent of the American population is non-Christian, including the almost 30 percent who are nonreligious.[1] More than half of Generation Z (those born after 1996) is non-Christian, including 43 percent who are nonreligious.[2]

Further, parents have the First Amendment right to determine which religion, if any, they teach their children to believe in. "The preservation and transmission of religious beliefs and worship is a responsibility and a choice committed to the private sphere." *Santa Fe*, 530 U.S. at 310 (quoting *Lee,* 505 U.S. at 589). The school's actions also violated parents' constitutional rights by allowing a guest speaker to proselytize and attempt to convert students to Christianity.

FFRF takes these kinds of violations seriously and we are willing to vigorously defend students' rights. We settled a lawsuit against a school district in West Virginia after it allowed a preacher to hold an assembly to proselytize students during the school day. *See Mays v. Cabell Cnty. Bd. of Educ.,* No. 3:22-cv-00085 (S.D. W.Va., Filed Feb. 17, 2022). As part of that settlement, the district agreed to pay nearly $175,000 in attorney fees.[3]

In order to comply with the First Amendment and protect students' and parents' constitutional rights, Galesburg CUSD #205 must ensure that its schools do not permit future guest speakers to abuse their access to students by proselytizing them and attempting to convert them. Please respond in writing with the steps the District is taking to ensure that this will not happen again. Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

Madeline Ziegler

Madeline Ziegler
Staff Attorney

[1] Pew Research Center (2024), http://bit.ly/3W6Cl3m.
[2] Pew Research Center (2024), http://bit.ly/48Drzce.
[3] ffrf.org/news/news-releases/item/42958-ffrf-victory-w-va-families-secure-policy-changes-in-religious-revival-lawsuit.