



September 24, 2015

OPEN LETTER REGARDING OFFICIAL PRAYER AND RELIGIOUS
ACTIVITY AT AIRLINE HIGH SCHOOL

Via fax 318-549-5004
And by mail
Mr. D.C. Machen, Jr.
Superintendent, Bossier Parish Schools
410 Sibley Street
Benton, LA 71006

Dear Mr. Machen:

It has been brought to the attention of the ACLU Foundation of Louisiana that Airline High School in Bossier Parish (“Airline”) has engaged in a pattern of religious proselytization by establishing “prayer boxes” with Christian symbols throughout the school and by religious messages in newsletters posted on the school’s website. A photograph of the “prayer boxes” and a copy of one such religious message are attached to this letter. We also understand that the Principal of Airline, Jason Rowland, has encouraged students to “pray to the Almighty God”

This letter is to inform you that these practices violate the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and comparable provisions of the Louisiana Constitution, and they must stop immediately.

Background

The September 2015 Message posted to the Airline High website closes with the phrase “The Future Starts Today – May God Bless You All – Jason Rowland, Principal, AHS.”

We understand that the same or a similar message has concluded previous messages on the AHS website.

We also understand that the Fellowship of Christian Athletes has set up “prayer boxes” with Christian symbols around Airline, with the knowledge and consent of school administrators.

Constitutional Analysis

The United States Constitution requires public schools to ensure that state-supported activity is not used for religious indoctrination.¹ The Constitution

¹ *Helland v. S. Bend Cmty. Sch. Corp.*, 93 F.3d 327, 331 (7th Cir. 1996); citing *Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 U.S. 578, 597 (1987); *Grand Rapids School Dist. v. Ball*, 473 U.S. 373, 385 (1985); *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602, 619 (1971).

forbids school-sponsored prayer in order to protect those whose convictions differ from government-sanctioned beliefs.² Public school employees are not entitled to use their government positions to promote and impose their personal religious beliefs on students.³ When school staff crosses the constitutional line, as the Airline principal has done by religious messaging and encouraging prayer, the courts have declared these activities unlawful.⁴

There is no question that the principal has violated these legal mandates by invoking God, prayer, and Christianity in school publications and on school grounds. This unlawful religious coercion is improper from any school employee but it is particularly egregious coming from the school principal, whose job is to teach and uphold, rather than violate, the legal rights of all.

Conclusion

With this information in mind, I urge you to:

1. Immediately remove all references to prayer from the website of Airline and any other schools in the Bossier Parish school district;
2. Immediately remove the “prayer boxes” and any similar devices at Airline and any other schools in the Bossier Parish school district;
3. Educate all school staff regarding the Constitutional protections of students and staff from religious indoctrination; and
4. Instruct the principal of Airline that neither he nor his staff may include religious references of any kind in school communications.

These policies and procedures must be communicated to all students and their parents or guardians.

² *Sch. Dist. of Abington Twp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963).

³ *See, Grossman v. S. Shore Pub. Sch. Dist.*, 507 F.3d 1097, 1099 (7th Cir. 2007) (“teachers and other public school employees have no right to make the promotion of religion a part of their job description and by doing so precipitate a possible violation of the First Amendment’s [E]stablishment [C]ause.”); *Helland v. S. Bend Cmty. Sch. Corp.*, 93 F.3d 327, 329, 331 (7th Cir. 1996) (holding that public-school district had properly dismissed substitute teacher for, among other infractions, “the unconstitutional interjection of religion” into classes “by reading the Bible aloud to middle and high school students, distributing Biblical pamphlets, and professing his belief in the Biblical version of creation in a fifth grade science class”); *Williams v. Vidmar*, 367 F. Supp. 2d 1265, 1275 (N.D. Cal. 2005) (“In the view of the Court, there is a well-defined difference between being an elementary school teacher who is an avowed Christian, which Williams is free to be, and expressing the Christian faith in the classroom.”).

⁴ *S.D. v. St. Johns Cnty. Sch. Dist.*, 632 F. Supp. 2d 1085, 1095 (M.D. Fla. 2009) (holding that school’s selection of “a patently religious and proselytizing” song to be performed by third-graders during an end-of-year assembly failed the endorsement test).

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Please confirm to this office that the School Board will take the necessary measures to ensure compliance with the law. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



Marjorie R. Esman
Executive Director

Cc: Mr. Jason Rowland by fax 318-549-5093
Principal, Airline High School

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