



March 30, 2015

OPEN LETTER REGARDING OFFICIAL PRAYER AND RELIGIOUS
STATEMENTS AT WALNUT HILL ELEMENTARY/MIDDLE SCHOOL

Via fax (318) 635-2649

And by mail

Dr. Theodis Lamar Goree, Jr
Superintendent, Caddo Parish Schools
1961 Midway Avenue | P.O. Box 32000
Shreveport, LA 71130-2000

Dear Dr. Goree:

It has been brought to the attention of the ACLU Foundation of Louisiana that Walnut Hill Elementary/Middle School (“Walnut Hill”) has engaged in a pattern of religious proselytization by sending messages to parents invoking prayer, and through a lengthy “Principal’s Message” on the school’s website. Copies of those messages are attached to this letter.

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

Background

The March 2015 Newsletter of Walnut Hill contained the following “Message to Parents”:

As our students prepare to take the state mandated tests, LEAP, iLEAP and PARCC, please pray that our God will give them the strength and mental fortitude, the patience, the wisdom, and the energy to do their best. Please help our children understand the meaning of Phillippians 4:13. . .I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me.

The newsletter also contained a lengthy “Principal’s Message” including numerous references to God and to prayer.

In addition, the school’s website includes the following “Principal’s message,” entitled “Truly We are Blessed”:

On mornings when the sun is beaming or hidden, our student prayer group, "Hornets for Hope", pray and give thanks to the Son of God for carrying our school over the thorns of negativity and the thistles of discord and setting it gently on the petals of harmony and the lily of tranquility. Our "Hornets for Hope" thank God for giving us a school that believes in God, family, and education.

We thank God for helping us to realize that if we removed Christ, family, and teachers from the lives of our children there is no way that adding more police officers, legislating more laws, building more jails, requiring more testing, mandating more parental involvement, earning more money, or purchasing more things could ever replace the blessings of God, the love of our family, and the knowledge imparted by our teachers.

A hundred years from now it will not matter what type of house we lived in, what color our skin was, how much money we had or what brand of clothes we wore, but what will matter is that we steadfastly walked in the ways of Christ, that we honored and loved our parents, family, and fellow man and that we lived by our school motto.”

AMERICAN CIVIL
LIBERTIES UNION
FOUNDATION OF
LOUISIANA
PO BOX 56157
NEW ORLEANS, LA 70156
T/504.522.0617
WWW.LAACLU.ORG

Constitutional Analysis

The United States Constitution requires public schools to ensure that state-supported activity is not used for religious indoctrination.¹ The Constitution 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 Walnut Hill Principal has done, by proselytizing students and subjecting them to religious indoctrination, the courts have declared these activities unlawful.⁴

There is no question that the Principal has violated these legal mandates by repeatedly invoking God, prayer, and Christianity throughout official school publications. No school employee may tell a student what religion to practice or even to practice religion at all, nor may a school official tell students or their families to teach any religious texts. This unlawful religious coercion is improper from any school employee but it is particularly egregious coming

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).

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).

March 30, 2015

Page 3 of 3

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 religious references from the website of Walnut Hills and any other schools in the Caddo Parish school district;
2. Educate all school staff regarding the Constitutional protections of students and staff from religious indoctrination; and
3. Instruct the Principal of Walnut Hill 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.

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. Albert Hardison by fax 318-688-6522
Principal, Walnut Hill Elementary/Middle School