

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 · MADISON, WI 53701 · (608) 256-8900 · WWW.FFRF.ORG

April 25, 2016

SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL:
mgferguson@genoaschools.com

Dr. Michael Ferguson
Superintendent
Genoa Area Local Schools
2810 N. Genoa-Clay Center Road
Genoa, OH 43430

Re: Unconstitutional religious display

Dear Superintendent Ferguson:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to alert you to a serious constitutional violation at Genoa High School. We were contacted by a concerned local citizen. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 23,000 members across the country, including more than 500 members in Ohio and a local chapter, Northern Ohio Freethought Society. Our purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

It is our understanding that a sign hanging in Genoa High School reads "FOLLOW CHRIST." An image of the sign is enclosed for your review.

It is unconstitutional for Genoa Area Local Schools to encourage its students to "Follow Christ," in effect encouraging non-Christian students to convert. We write to request that this sign be removed immediately.

The District violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution when it allows its schools to display religious symbols or messages. Public schools may not advance, prefer, or promote religion. See *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). This display violates this basic constitutional prohibition by creating the appearance that the District prefers religion over nonreligion and Christianity over all other faiths.

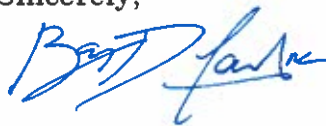
Courts have continually held that school districts may not display religious messages or iconography in public schools. *See, e.g., Stone v. Graham*, 449 U.S. 39 (1980) (ruling that the Ten Commandments may not be displayed on classroom walls); *Lee v. York Cnty.*, 484 F.3d 689 (4th Cir. 2007) (ruling 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).

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 Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309 (2000) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring)).

This religious display is particularly inappropriate given that nearly 30% of Americans are non-Christians, either practicing a minority religion or no religion at all, and about 44% of millennials are non-Christian.¹ The display alienates those students, families, teachers, and members of the public whose religious beliefs are inconsistent with the message being promoted by the school.

In recognition of the District’s constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion, please remove this sign immediately. Please reply in writing with the steps taken to remedy this serious constitutional violation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Ryan D. Jayne".

Ryan D. Jayne, Esq.
Diane Uhl Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure

¹ *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (May 12, 2015), *available*

LOVE

SHOW GRACE

WORK HARD

BE GRATEFUL

FOLLOW CHRIST