

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

October 6, 2011

SENT VIA MAIL & FAX  
(817) 215-0170

Dr. Karen G. Rue  
Superintendent  
Northwest Independent School District  
P.O. Box 77070  
Fort Worth, TX 76177

Re: Seven Project Assembly

Dear Dr. Rue:

I am writing on behalf of concerned district residents, and other Texas members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), to alert you to serious constitutional concerns at a Northwest ISD school. FFRF is a nationwide nonprofit organization with over 17,000 members, including over 800 in Texas. Our purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

It is our information and understanding that a "Seven Project" assembly is scheduled for Wednesday October 12, 2011, at Byron Nelson High School. We were told the assembly is a part of the school's "character initiative. It is our information and understanding that this assembly will also include speakers affiliated with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and the director of the I Am Second campaign. After reviewing the Seven Project's website (<http://youthalive.ag.org/seven/index.cfm>), it is clear that the group is a pervasively sectarian religious organization. The group's stated goal is "[c]onnecting your community to share Jesus." Their website also states that the project "serves as a catalyst to mobilize and equip Christian communities to reach out to schools." In fact, the website blatantly states that the "Seven Project is not merely a school assembly or evening rally" but is "a comprehensive outreach strategy that equips and trains leaders and students in effective evangelism and discipleship."

Furthermore, the Seven Project appears to be directly affiliated with the Assemblies of God National Youth Ministries, whose goal is to "win, build, and send students to the cause of Jesus Christ."

Given the overtly religious nature of this program, Northwest ISD must refrain from hosting these types of assemblies. It is well settled that public schools may not advance or promote religion. *See generally, 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 Twshp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962). Moreover, "the preservation and transmission of religious beliefs and worship is a responsibility and a choice committed to the

private sphere.” *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 310 (2001)(quoting *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. at 589). In *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992), the Supreme Court extended the prohibition of school sponsored prayers beyond the classroom to all school functions (holding prayers at public high school graduations an impermissible establishment of religion). Thus, religious programming as part of a school assembly is in direct violation of the Establishment Clause.

The program is especially concerning given the captive audience of impressionable students in attendance. Additionally, regardless of the motives of the presenters, allowing a Christian organization access to your student body gives the appearance that Northwest IDS endorse the program’s message. 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 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, 309-10 (2001)(quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. at 668)(O’Connor, J., concurring).

We are aware that some Christian missionaries insinuate themselves into public schools through camouflaging their purposes and by professing to be “experts” in some secular field or other. These groups also often use school assemblies to recruit for religious evening programs with the mission of “winning souls.”

It is incumbent that public officials do “due diligence” when approached by outside groups with vested interests in “pitching” their messages to a captive audience of public school students. However, in this case, it would have taken only a cursory glance at the Seven Project’s website to verify its religious agenda. It is difficult for us to understand how this event could have been approved.

We request that Northwest IDS cancel the inappropriate and unconstitutional Seven Project assembly immediately. Please notify us in writing of the steps your District has taken to remedy this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Patrick Elliott". The signature is written in a cursive, somewhat stylized font.

Patrick Elliott  
Staff Attorney