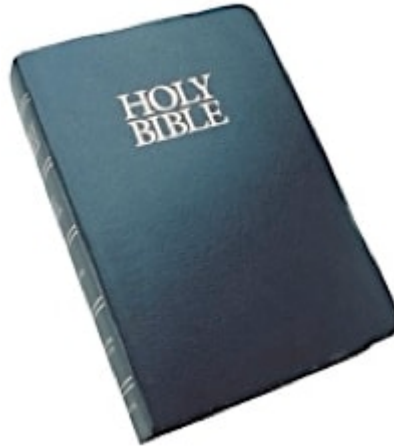




Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on May 13, 2011

ACLU Targets Tennessee Schools Over Christian Activities

Legal action by the ACLU has prompted a school district in White County, Tennessee, to ban the Gideons from distributing their Bibles to students in classrooms. According to the *Tennessean* newspaper, members of a local chapter of the Gideons, an international Bible distribution organization headquartered in Nashville, “came into the classroom, and students were invited up to get a Bible if they wanted one.” The paper reported that one student “said she didn’t want to take [a Bible] but felt pressured to do so. Her mother later complained to school officials and then to the ACLU...”



Hedy Weinberg, head of the ACLU’s Tennessee cell, said that when her group was informed that the Bible group had handed out Bibles at the elementary School in Doyle, a small community east 100 miles east of Nashville, her legal assault team quickly mobilized.

An ACLU press release recalled that the legal group “sent a letter to White County Schools Director Sandra Crouch demanding that the practice of allowing outside groups to enter public elementary schools during the school day to distribute religious texts to students cease immediately.” The school acquiesced, and the resulting agreement “ensures that White County students can now exercise their Constitutional right to make religious decisions with their families and faith communities, without fear of coercion by school officials,” the ACLU declared.

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Weinberg announced that “White County Schools’ decision to enter into this agreement reinforces the important constitutional guarantee of religious freedom. Their efforts ensure that all students will be treated fairly, regardless of their religious beliefs.”

But White County school officials followed up Weinberg’s victory speech with their own take on the outcome of the negotiations between the two parties, insisting that the signed agreement did not imply that the school district had done anything illegal. Attorney Aby Southerland with the [American Center for Law and Justice](#) (ACLJ), the conservative legal advocacy group that represented the school district, [emphasized in a statement](#) that the agreement was a simple affirmation that the school district was committed to maintaining “a neutral policy with regards to the availability of materials to its students, whether those materials are religious or non-religious, and that those materials are made available to students in a non-coercive manner.”

The action against the schools in White County is just the latest effort the ACLU has taken to put a lid on religious activities in schools around the state. The *Tennessean* [reported on May 3](#) that the ACLU had filed suit against the school district in Sumner County, where schools “have shown a pattern of promoting Christianity by allowing groups to hand out Bibles at school, having students sing ‘Shout Amen’ in a chorus program, and permitting a teacher to hang a cross in her classroom....”



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According to the newspaper, the ACLU lawsuit, filed on behalf of nine students in the district, alleged, among other charges, that:

- The district allowed Gideons representatives to “proselytize and hand out Bibles to Sumner students.”
- A Bible club at an elementary school “often prayed over the loudspeaker” during morning announcements.
- During a fall music program, a middle school choir performed nine songs, “seven of which were religious in nature.”
- A teacher at another middle school “displayed a 10-inch cross above her whiteboard.”
- A youth pastor from a local Baptist church was allowed to eat lunch with students at one of the middle schools “and talk about his church and religion.”

As in the White County schools case, the ACLJ has come to the rescue of the Sumner County school district, with ACLJ attorney Wesley Southerland telling the *Tennessean*: “We are aware of the allegations and we are prepared to defend the allegations. We are taking all precautions to make sure the school system is solely proceeding in a manner consistent with the Constitution.”

In the past three years the ACLU has targeted at least two other school districts in Tennessee over faith issues. “Cheatham County schools settled a case with the ACLU last year about a planned prayer at a graduation ceremony and handing out of Bibles by a religious group,” noted the *Tennessean*. And in 2008 the ACLU successfully sued Wilson County schools after it was discovered that the website of one of its elementary schools contained links to activities sponsored by “Praying Parents,” a local Christian group.



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