

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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March 10, 2011

SENT VIA MAIL & EMAIL  
([DMccarthy@fjturner.k12.wi.us](mailto:DMccarthy@fjturner.k12.wi.us))

Dr. Dennis McCarthy  
Superintendent  
School District of Beloit Turner  
1237 Inman Parkway  
Beloit WI 53511

Dear Dr. McCarthy:

I am writing on behalf of a District staff member and members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding concerns over the display of a cross on ribbons that staff were requested to wear for Martin Luther King Day. FFRF is a nationwide nonprofit organization that works to protect the constitutional principle of separation between church and state. FFRF represents 16,000 members across the country, including nearly 1,300 members in Wisconsin.

It is our understanding that staff were sent the following email on January 14, 2011:

*All Staff,  
In honor of the National holiday on Monday, we will be delivering the Dr. King ribbons this A.M. All staff are asked to wear the ribbons today and on Monday.  
Thank You.*

*Dr. William L. Beckley  
Curriculum/Staff Development*

We understand that the ribbons distributed to staff contained an image of a cross and said at the bottom, "Beloit Community Ministers Fellowship." A photo of the ribbon is enclosed.

While honoring Dr. King is laudable and a worthy cause, the request for all staff to wear the ribbon with the Latin cross with the identification, "Beloit Community Ministers Fellowship," made at least one staff member uncomfortable. The Latin cross is universally understood to represent Christianity. Non-Christians and nonbelievers do not wish to display this Christian symbol on their person.

We also have concerns with how students may view the ribbons. Students may perceive the ribbons as an endorsement of Christianity and the Beloit Community Ministers Fellowship. While he was a devout Christian, Dr. King recognized the

importance of protecting the rights of conscience of public school students (He fully supported decisions by the Supreme Court that removed prayer from public schools).

Government actors must be especially careful to remain neutral on matters of religion in the public school context. The Supreme Court has continually protected school children from endorsement or advancement of religion in public schools. *See generally, Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2001); *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).

We hope you will understand why the staff member contacted us rather than you on this matter. Our complainant's identity is held in confidence so that there is no possibility of negative interaction between the staff member and other District employees.

We ask that you remain sensitive to the diverse religious and nonreligious views of students and staff in your District as well as to the dictates of the Constitution and court precedent. We request that future Martin Luther King Day displays do not include the Latin cross or promote the ministerial association. We absolutely support the District in honoring this important holiday in an appropriate way. Please let us know what action you are taking on this matter so we may notify our complainant. May we hear from you at your earliest convenience?

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Patrick C. Elliott".

Patrick C. Elliott  
Staff Attorney