

**BRITISH COLUMBIA HUMANIST ASSOCIATION**

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**BC HUMANIST**  
ASSOCIATION

Kevin Godden, Superintendent  
Abbotsford School District  
2790 Tims Street  
Abbotsford BC V2T 4M7

March 21, 2016

**RE: End distribution of religious materials in public schools**

Dear Kevin Godden,

Last year we were told that, in response to a freedom of information request, the Abbotsford School District (the “District”) routinely distributes materials from local religious organizations, most notably New Testament booklet consent cards from Gideon’s International, to parents and students (which are then exchanged for New Testament Bibles). The British Columbia Humanist Association sees the distribution of religious materials (where those materials are not part of an approved curriculum) by a government funded agency, such as a school district, as unconstitutional. We request that School District No 34 immediately discontinue any current or future distribution of proselytizing religious materials.

Any promotion of religious materials shows favouritism toward those particular beliefs and against non-belief. In *Mouvement laïque québécois v Saguenay (City)*, 2015 SCC 16, Chief Justice McLachlin, writing for the majority, said “The state must instead remain neutral... which means that it must neither favour nor hinder any particular belief, and the same holds true for non-belief.” Similarly, in *RC v District School Board of Niagara*, 2013 HRTO 1382, the adjudicator found that only allowing Christian’s to distribute Gideon Bibles in a public school is discriminatory to atheists.

We further see the distribution of religious materials to be in violation of Section 76 of the British Columbia *School Act*, which requires that:

*76 (1) All schools and Provincial schools must be conducted on strictly secular and non-sectarian principles.*

*(2) The highest morality must be inculcated, but no religious dogma or creed is to be taught in a school or Provincial school.*

In *Chamberlain v. Surrey School District No. 36*, 2002 SCC 86, Chief Justice McLachlin writes that this section means that the District “must act in a way that promotes respect and tolerance for all the diverse groups that it represents and serves” and that acting in an exclusionary way violates this principle of secularism.

We understand that some of these materials are only distributed to students who return a parental consent form; however, we believe that this discriminates against non-Christian students by unfairly singling them out amongst their peers. This is supported by *Zylberberg v. Sudbury Board of Education (Director)* (ON CA), [1988] OJ No 1488, which states “the effect of the exemption provisions is to discriminate against religious minorities.” Students cannot be compelled to disclose their religious beliefs or lack thereof.

We would further argue that the district’s current laissez faire approach to distributing religious materials, where organizations are free to approach the district with materials to be considered for distribution, is inherently biased toward dominant religions that actively proselytize and is discriminatory against minority religious and non-religious worldviews that don’t. Even among worldviews that do seek to promote themselves, not all have the financial capacity to match the Gideon’s or to sustain an annual distribution program. Therefore, simply permitting any religious group to distribute materials through the school system will discriminate against minority religious communities by limiting the exposure of students to only a subset of our communities’ multicultural diversity.

Administrative Procedure 301 of the Abbotsford School District handbook says that “No organization or person shall have access to any students in the Abbotsford School District without the expressed permission of the Superintendent or designate.” The procedure clearly grants you the authority to withdraw consent from an organization and to refuse to distribute religious materials.

We respectfully request that you respond to us in writing to advise whether you will discontinue the distribution of Gideon Testaments and other religious materials. If not, do you plan on consulting with other faith groups on the distribution of materials and would you agree to distribute the attached comic to all grade 5 students?

Yours sincerely,



Ian Bushfield  
Executive Director

The British Columbia Humanist Association has been providing a community and voice for Humanists, atheists, agnostics, and the non-religious of Metro Vancouver and British Columbia for since 1984. We support the growth of Humanist communities across BC, provide Humanist ceremonies, and campaign for progressive and secular values.