

BRITISH COLUMBIA HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

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November 29, 2016

Mark Wintjes, Acting Superintendent
School District 27 (Cariboo-Chilcotin)
350 North 2nd Avenue
Williams Lake, BC V2G 1Z9

Re: End distribution of Gideon Bibles

Dear Mark Wintjes,

We understand that a number of teachers and the President of the Cariboo-Chilcotin Teachers' Association have expressed their concerns with your policy to distribute consent cards from Gideon's International to parents and students (which are then exchanged for 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 27 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. Chief Justice McLachlin, writing for the Supreme Court of Canada, has 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."¹ Similarly, an Ontario Human Rights Tribunal held in 2013 that only allowing Christians to distribute Gideon Bibles in a public school is discriminatory to atheists.²

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.

¹ *Mouvement laïque québécois v Saguenay (City)*, 2015 SCC 16

² *RC v District School Board of Niagara*, 2013 HRTO 1382

The Supreme Court of Canada ruled that this section means that districts “must act in a way that promotes respect and tolerance for all the diverse groups that it represents and serves.”³ Acting in an exclusionary way violates the 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 an Ontario Court of Appeal ruling on prayer in classrooms, which states “the effect of the exemption provisions is to discriminate against religious minorities.”⁴ Students cannot be compelled to disclose their religious beliefs or lack thereof.

We also note that nearly all BC public school districts, including most recently SD 34 (Abbotsford), have ended the distribution of Gideon Bibles.⁵ Some of the last districts to stop the practice claimed that any group was free to approach the district with materials to be considered for distribution. This system, however, is inherently biased toward dominant religions that actively proselytize and against minority 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. This discrimination is particularly egregious in light of our shared efforts for Reconciliation.

Policy No 1324 of the SD 27 Policy Manual grants you the authority to refuse to distribute religious materials. The preamble expressly warns that “some [requests] attempt only to exploit a captive audience.” It's our opinion that the educational value of the Bible is in a comparative religions and ethics class. Distribution through the classroom or central office is a blatant attempt to exploit the authority of our schools to push religion.

We respectfully request that you respond to us in writing to advise whether you will discontinue the distribution of Gideon Bibles. If not, do you plan on consulting with other faith groups on the distribution of materials and would you agree to distribute copies of “Are you scared of hell?” or “No thinking allowed?” editions of *Godless Comics* to all grade 5 students?⁶

Yours sincerely

Ian Bushfield
Executive Director

³ *Chamberlain v. Surrey School District No. 36*, 2002 SCC 86

⁴ *Zylberberg v Sudbury Board of Education (Director)* (ON CA), [1988] OJ No 1488

⁵ Bible distribution ends in Abbotsford School District, BC Humanist Association. Jun 14, 2016. http://www.bchumanist.ca/bible_distribution_ends_in_abbotsford

⁶ Available to review at <http://godlesscomics.com/comics> The BCHA can provide print copies for distribution.