

The Freethought Society News

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September/October 2010 Newsletter, Volume 1, Number 5
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Don't let BSA recruit in your local public school!

by Margaret Downey

In 2001, the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) declared themselves a “private” organization. As a private organization, BSA can maintain strict bigoted membership policies. One policy is that members and volunteers must be “religious.” BSA requires that all members and volunteers sign a “Declaration of Religious Principles (DRP).” The DRP is used to determine who qualifies for membership. The DRP states in part:

The Boy Scouts of America maintains that no member can grow into the best kind of citizenship without recognizing an obligation to God. In the first part of the Scout Oath or Promise the member declares, ‘On my honor I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout Law.’ The recognition of God as the ruling and leading power in the universe and the grateful acknowledgment of His favors and blessings are necessary to the best type of citizenship and are wholesome precepts in the education of the growing members.


Principled nontheists and those who are not yet old enough to emphatically state that they believe in a God are faced with a dilemma — sign the DRP in order to become a member of the world’s largest youth group — or be left out and possibly face being exposed as holding a minority non-religious opinion. The membership requirement of a religious affiliation should not be asked if BSA enters a public school setting to recruit. If BSA desires only religious children, they should limit their recruitment drives to religious schools only!

The “private” nature of BSA is allowing for the organization to ignore federal anti-discrimination hiring laws. BSA hires only like-minded people. BSA ignores anti-discrimination state and local statutes across the nation. Those who are exposed as and admit to being nontheists are immediately fired. Watch for more articles about BSA employment discrimination cases in future issues of Freethought Society (FS) newsletters. Concerned BSA members who question these new policies and the enforcement of the DRP are also dismissed — whether or not they are nontheists themselves! BSA demands compliance “down the line” to all their policies. Opposing voices are silenced with a dismissal letter.

BSA school recruitment drives are typically conducted during the month of September. If you do not have a child attending a public school, the only way to discover if BSA has entered your public school system to conduct a recruitment drive is to make telephone inquiries directly to the office of the school superintendent or to your local elementary school principal. Sometimes, BSA will post lawn signs on the grounds of the public schools during their recruitment drives. Private organization who openly discriminate should not be allowed to stake signs on the grounds of a public school. Signs entangle the school into a question of endorsement and approval of BSA membership policies. If and when you see a BSA lawn sign on the grounds of a public school, please take note and commit to join in a protest effort highlighted in this issue of *The Freethought Society News*.

Several years ago, I noticed BSA recruitment lawn signs on the grounds of the Pocopson Elementary School. I pulled into the school and demanded to speak to the principal. I waited only a few minutes after telling the secretary why I had stopped. Claiming he knew nothing about BSA membership restrictions, the principal referred me to the school superintendent. After **Sally Flynn** and I visit with the Unionville School Superintendent **Sharon Parker**, BSA recruitment lawn signs were removed. The signs have not appeared since. My advise is that two people attend any meetings that take place. A witness to any discussion that may lead to a lawsuit is always a good idea.

Some public schools have allowed a teacher or school official to distribute BSA recruitment literature before, during and after classes. The authority of a school representative is powerful and when BSA recruitment materials are provide by someone with direct association to the school, the credibility of the BSA program is enhanced. Potential discrimination complaints and lawsuits can be avoided if BSA and its literature are simply not allowed on school grounds.

This issue of *The Freethought Society News* contains information to begin a BSA public school recruitment protest in your area should you discover an endorsement and/or entanglement. FS is asking that volunteers will place important fact-finding phone calls. Questions are listed on page two of this newsletter. Depending on the answers, action might be needed to object to a BSA recruitment drive. 

Questions and Prep for School District Calls

Please look up the name and contact information for the public school superintendent located where you pay taxes. Make sure to have this list of questions handy and write down the responses. Include the date and make sure to properly identify the person who answers your questions. Please report your findings to **Margaret Downey**, chair of the Freethought Society's Anti-Discrimination Support Network at: margaret@FtSociety.org. Please contact Downey, should you need further activist assistance. Thanks in advance for your activist efforts.

1. Does the school district have an anti-discrimination policy in place? If so, ask for a copy or link to see it.
2. Does the school district acknowledge that there are non-religious, gay and disabled members in the community?
3. Has the Boy Scouts of America conducted a recruitment drive in the school district (usually done in elementary school settings)?
4. If so, does it concern the superintendent, principals, teachers and school board members that a child may be discriminated against by the Boy Scouts of America (BSA)?
5. If BSA literature is allowed will it fully disclose the possible types of discriminatory situations that might occur?
6. Have any teachers been involved with the distribution of BSA literature in or out of a classroom?
7. Is BSA allowed to stake recruitment lawn signs on public school property?
8. Will a BSA recruitment announcement be made over school PA systems? If so does it state that BSA information and literature will be available to ALL students or will it be made perfectly clear that only religious and straight boys can join BSA?
9. Will BSA materials be placed on a table? If so, will it be staffed by school personnel?
10. If the material is placed on a table, will there be a sign indicating that only the religious and straight need apply?
11. If teachers are involved with the distribution of BSA literature, will the teachers make it clear that nontheists or gay youths and adults are not welcome in BSA?
12. Has the school district and its legal department reviewed the documents that BSA plans to distribute?
13. Would the school district allow a recruitment drive lead by a White Supremacist Youth Group or other private groups that openly discriminate?
14. How can the school district fully protect non-religious and/or gay students from discrimination at the hands of BSA?
15. Would the school district knowingly set up a youngster for that type of psychologically damaging situation?
16. What does the school district expect will happen when a student receives BSA materials and discovers either at school or at home that as a nontheist and/or gay member of society he is unable to join the scouting organization?
17. If it is against the law to require a signed religious affirmation through the public schools, how can the school district justify actively endorsing an organization that requires a signed religious affirmation and is known for discriminating against gays and nontheists?
18. When a child is invited by the school system, then rejected by BSA because of having a nontheist lifestance or for being gay, doesn't that automatically identify them to teachers and fellow students creating another possible scenario of discrimination?
19. Discrimination places the school district at risk of being sued. Taxpayers in the district do not wish to see their taxes spent defending a suit that can easily be avoided. Wouldn't most or all taxpayers, principals, teachers and school board members, desire to prevent avoidable legal expenses?
20. If the school district chooses to ignore these warnings and complaints, what will be the defense of the school district if and when a lawsuit is filed?
21. Public schools are required, because of the provisions in the United States Constitution, to remain neutral with respect to religious practice and belief. How can the school district claim neutrality knowing that a "religious affirmation" is of foremost importance in the BSA?
22. If the school district approves the distribution of BSA materials, it may be construed to mean that the district is also showing total disregard for the nontheist community and those of a homosexual orientation. Does the school district want to be remembered throughout history as promoters of bigotry?
23. Wouldn't the school district be much more proud to have upheld the wall between religion and government simply because it was right — not because it was forced to do so with legal intervention?



Samples Letter to School District Regarding BSA

Please consider writing a letter/email of concern to your school superintendent regarding any BSA entanglement you may discover. Below is a sample letter that was sent to a Florida school district after it was discovered that BSA had discriminated against a disabled woman and her entire family. After an expensive legal battle, the **Rasmussen** family eventually lost the complicated suit. Reoccurrence of similar discrimination issues are of great concern, however. Rasmussen case details can be found at:

<http://classweb.gmu.edu/jkozlows/RPLR/080306b.pdf>

Please send a copy of your protest correspondence to **Margaret Downey**, chair of the Freethought Society's Anti-Discrimination Support Network at: margaret@FtSociety.org. Please contact Downey, should you need further activist assistance. Thanks in advance for your activist efforts.

Dear Brevard County School Board Members:

These comments are about the interest by the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) being allowed to recruit members through the tax funded public school system in Brevard County on Tuesday, August 11, 2009. On the surface, supporting BSA seems simple — perhaps innocuous.

Center for Inquiry Florida, however, holds that no taxpayer funded public governmental entity should support discriminatory organizations. The private status of the BSA was recognized on June 28, 2000, by the United States Supreme Court. The court stated that BSA has the right to exclude from membership anyone they choose. Yet, BSA continues enjoying special privileges and indirect (perhaps also direct) public tax support that should not be available to any closed-to-the-public organization.

Center for Inquiry Florida strongly opposes discriminatory organizations being allowed to receive public funds, especially in this time of economic hardship. The privilege (not a right) of being allowed to use the public school system to recruit members is one such unacceptable situation. You might have forgotten that BSA excludes, discriminates against, and publicly offends the non-religious people, the gay/LGBT community, and many disabled people; and with seeming pride, prevents them and others from joining and volunteering. Since these are well documented facts, Center for Inquiry Florida urges the Brevard County School Board to consider the following, and draw the obvious conclusion (note that these facts are presented from newspapers, magazines, public statements of BSA officials, TV and radio news sources online, and quoted with permission from the Anti-Discrimination Support Network):

1. Due to provisions in the United States Constitution and US Supreme Court cases, public schools are required to remain neutral with respect to religious practice and belief. If the school board approves distribution of literature from a youth group that will only accept religious, straight and able-bodied applicants, the school board is guilty of promoting discrimination. Allowing a group that openly and proudly discriminates creates an entanglement situation placing teachers and school officials as a party to discrimination practices.
2. Allowing BSA to recruit in your public schools, knowing that BSA openly discriminates is not prudent. To best protect taxpayer money from being spent on a possible discrimination lawsuit, the school board should prevent a BSA recruitment drive as a preventative measure. Tax dollars should be used to provide books and to maintain the school. Tax dollars should also be used to hire teachers and administrators who care about each and every student regardless of religion, sexual orientation or disability. If the school board does nothing to prevent discrimination, tax dollars may be wasted in the courtroom.
3. Preventing BSA from conducting a recruitment drive in the public school system of Brevard County, the Brevard County School Board can help send a message to BSA that their biased membership policy is unacceptable. School board members can take part in a stand for equal rights. Help us demand that discrimination of any sort is unwelcome. BSA must return to being an open-to-the-public organization that serves all youths and allows volunteer opportunities to all citizens regardless of religion, sexual orientation or disability or suffer the consequences. We expect each member of the Brevard County School Board to carefully examine their options, especially consulting with legal counsel, and make a logical public-interest decision before voting.

Cordially,

Fredrick Rea O'Keefe, Center for Inquiry Florida's Acting Executive Director