



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on August 1, 2013

Mom Banned From Praying for Children's Safety on School Grounds

An atheist group has convinced the Concord, New Hampshire, school district to put a stop to a mother's practice of showing up at a local school each morning to pray for the safety of her children and other students who attend the school. Beginning in February, after bullets were discovered in one of the bathrooms at Concord High School where her two teen children attend, Lizarda Urena had been coming to the school each morning, arriving around 7 a.m. and spending approximately 15 minutes reading Bible Scripture aloud and praying for the safety of her children and other students.



Urena, who was described by the [New Hampshire Union-Leader](#) as an anti-bullying activist, continued her morning prayer vigil for four months with no complaints until the ubiquitous and pesky Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) somehow got wind of what she was doing and contacted the Concord school district to protest and insist that school officials make the concerned mother stop.

"We sent an open records request to the school district, asking them for copies of any meeting minutes or any sort of documents which gave this woman permission to pray on school property," FFRF attorney Rebecca Markert told the *Union-Leader*. When district superintendent Christine Rath responded that "there is no document giving Ms. Urena permission to pray on school property," the atheist group sprang into action, shooting off a letter to the district, insisting that it put a stop to the mother's daily prayers. "In allowing Ms. Urena to pray aloud daily," the letter read, "... the Concord School District is placing its 'stamp of approval' on the religious messages contained in her prayers."

Attorney Markert noted that in her daily vigil, "Urena positions herself at the top of the school's stairs and prays out loud," adding that she "holds her hands out toward students entering the school building."

At first the school district merely asked Urena to stop praying out loud, allowing her to continue coming each morning to the school, where she stood silently to pray over the arriving students. "She's not teaching prayer, she's not out there asking kids to come with [her]," the high school's principal, Gene Connolly, told the [Concord Monitor](#) in May, when the conflict first began. "She does not promote religion."

That response was apparently not sufficient, however, and in late July the school board decided that Urena will not be allowed to continue to pray on school property when the new school year begins this fall. "To be fair to all the kids in the school, it is probably best for the principal to say that she shouldn't be speaking out like this and proselytizing on school grounds," school board President Kassandra Ardinger told local newspapers. "The best mode of action was to tell her to cool it."



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While the FFRF had no ready response at its hollow victory, another secular group applauded the Concord school board's decision. "There is a particular concern with regard to the mixing of religious messaging and education by a school being perceived as endorsing a particular religious message," said Devon Chaffee of New Hampshire's ACLU franchise. "The real question here is whether the acquiescence of the school in permitting these prayers reaches the level of sponsored speech ... her presence does give the impression that the school condones and endorses her activity."

But Matt Sharp of [Alliance Defending Freedom](#), a conservative Christian legal advocacy group, said that the school district had no legal right to silence the mother. "Students and community members that are allowed to come on campus and participate in a neutral thing are allowed to express religious viewpoints," Sharp told the New Hampshire *Union-Leader*. "The students know it's the mother and her own speech — something that the First Amendment protects — and that it is not the school mandating this woman to do it."

One local pastor, David Pinckney of the River of Grace Church in Concord, said he thought the decision to ban Urena from praying on school grounds was "absurd," since no one was being harmed or inconvenienced. "Who is being hurt by a mom praying on the school steps?" he wondered.

For her part, Lizarda Urena has responded graciously throughout the whole ordeal, and said that while she may not be able to stay on school grounds to pray for the students' safety, she will continue at home or at a convenience store across from the school. The Concord *Monitor* reported that while Urena "is sad she will be asked to leave, she said she appreciates that Connolly let her pray there for several months. 'I understand, and I appreciate Mr. Connolly giving me a good opportunity,' she said. 'Even the superintendent, Chris Rath, she was nice to me, and I appreciate what they did.'"



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