



School Districts Harassed by Secular Group on Issue of Prayer

The Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) continues its attack on the constitutionally guaranteed right of free speech and religious expression as it targets school districts in Mississippi and Kentucky that have held to their long-time traditions of public prayer. On August 18th the Memphis Commercial Appeal reported that the Wisconsin-based secularist group had sent a letter to the superintendent of the DeSoto County, Mississippi, school district, the largest in the state with 40 schools and 32,000 students, demanding that the district stop allowing prayers at school athletic events and high school graduations.



“Prayer over the loudspeakers at football games is a constitutional no-no,” quipped FFRF spokeswoman Annie Laurie Gaylor. “The Supreme Court has spoken on this issue.... We’ve given them the law, and the law is incontrovertible. What they’re doing is illegal.”

The *Commercial Appeal* noted that on “Friday nights, it’s customary for the football public address announcer to hand over the microphone to a student or teacher to pray before the home team’s band performs the national anthem.” But, intoned Gaylor, “You can’t have prayer at public-school events. You can’t just go along and ignore the Supreme Court. It’s the law of the land and it’s a good law, because religion does not belong in our schools.”

Gaylor boasted that in the past her group had “stopped this kind of thing throughout the whole state [of Tennessee]. We ended up having to send an educational letter to every superintendent, because once we made the complaint public, they were just coming out of the woodwork.” Recalled the secularist spokesperson: “They were praying for the success of the upcoming school year, and that’s a no-no. Sometimes school officials are really ignorant of the law. They’ve been breaking it for so long, they don’t even recognize it.”

By August 23rd, the school district had apparently caved in to FFRF’s demands, with the godless group declaring in a [press release](#) that the DeSoto school board had voted to ban prayers at games. “Our current policy is not to have prayers in football games and we’re going to abide by that which we believe the law to be,” conceded Keith Treadway, the school board’s attorney. “We will not have prayer over the PA. The principals have all expressed that they are aware of the law and intend to abide by it.”

Similarly, as reported by [CBN News](#), the tradition of starting football games with prayer at Bell County High School in Pineville, Kentucky came to an abrupt halt after the school board was threatened by the FFRF. “School Superintendent George Thompson said the practice of having a local pastor offer prayer over loudspeakers was halted because previous court rulings indicated the county would lose a court battle,” reported CBN. “Folks were pretty upset” about the decision to halt the tradition. Thompson



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said. "Facebook has gone wild."

One local resident whose husband, a local pastor, has offered prayer at the games for the past twenty years, agreed that the move didn't sit well with the majority of area residents. "It's sad that one person or two can stop this when there are so many of us wanting this," Sandra Stepp told the [Lexington Herald-Leader](#).

The FFRF's Gaylor was pleased with the victory, but expressed her undisguised displeasure with Bell County School Superintendent George Thompson. "While we're pleased at the quick action to halt this unconstitutional practice," she said, "what is so very troubling about this case is that the superintendent admitted freely to media that he knew the practice was a violation." Gaylor wondered aloud about the number of students who may have been "subjected to illegal Christian prayer because the superintendent hadn't yet 'gotten caught'?" This is sending a message of contempt for our constitutional principle of separation between religion and government. It is mis-educating students, and it is appalling."

In reality, a majority of Americans are probably more aligned with the views of legal advocacy groups like the [Alliance Defense Fund](#) (ADF), which in a similar case involving the FFRF has advised a Mississippi school district that its officials and students are well within their constitutionally guaranteed rights to pray at school functions.

As reported by [OneNewsNow.com](#), Pascagoula district faculty and staff had gathered outside a local school "with other members of the community on the final Sunday in July to pray for the coming school year, which ... prompted the Freedom From Religion Foundation to demand that never happen again."

According to an [ADF report](#), the FFRF sent [a letter](#) demanding "that the district prohibit school staff from organizing or participating in private prayer gatherings with other members of the community, such as one that was held on a weekend before the beginning of the school year."

In the letter to Pascagoula school superintendent Wayne Rodolfich, FFRF attorney Stephanie Schmidt noted that, at the request of high school principal Al Sparkman, "faculty members, parents, students, and pastors gathered at the school to pray for the success of the upcoming school year." According to Schmidt, one teacher was even heard to pray aloud, "They say you can take prayer out of the schools, but you can't take it out of our hearts, Lord."

Schmidt warned Rodolfich that it is "well settled that public schools may not advance or promote religion, including religious exercise such as prayer." Declaring that either promoting or encouraging prayer "violates the First Amendment," Schmidt demanded that the district "immediately end Principal Sparkman's practice of encouraging organizing [sic.] prayer events at Pascagoula High School," and that "appropriate steps be taken to prevent future prayer events organized by school officials."

As the district considered its options in the case, however, the Alliance Defense Fund sent [its own letter](#) to Superintendent Rodolfich, encouraging him and the district to stand their ground against the FFRF's intimidation.

"Public school principals, teachers, and staff members should not be threatened for exercising their constitutionally protected right to organize and participate in private, religious events in their personal capacities," ADF Senior Counsel David Cortman noted in reference to the case. "Contrary to what the Freedom From Religion Foundation is arguing, this is not a government establishment of religion by any stretch of the imagination, except theirs."



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Citing the Supreme Court and other federal legal rulings, the ADF's letter assured Rodolfich that teachers and other school officials are perfectly within their rights as private citizens to take part in prayer services and other religious activities.

ADF Legal Counsel Jeremy Tedesco noted that the circumstances in question "would be no different from Principal Sparkman teaching a Sunday school class at a church that rented school facilities for its Sunday services. In both situations, Principal Sparkman is acting in his personal capacity as a citizen and has the same right to express his religious beliefs as any other citizen."

As of this writing, the school district had not announced which organization's advice it would heed in the case.

Photo: Players on the University of Tennessee at Martin football team take part in a prayer before their game against Kentucky Wesleyan College on Sept. 13, 2001, in Martin, Tenn.: AP Images



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