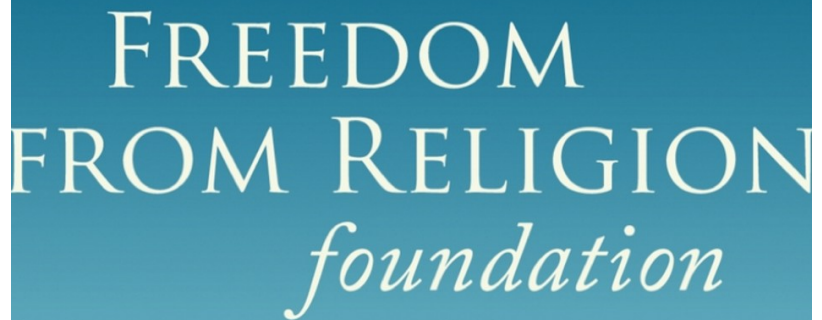




Secular Group Targets Georgia School District Over Religious Expression

A Georgia school district is being targeted by the Wisconsin-based Freedom From Religion Foundation over what the group claims is the district's continued violation of the First Amendment's supposed ban on religious expression in government institutions. The FFRF's assault on the Houston County, Georgia, school district began in June after a number of individuals supposedly complained that the graduation ceremony at Veterans High School in the community of Kathleen included prayer and religious music, reported [Georgia Public Broadcasting](#). Later, more complaints surfaced about similar content during the graduation ceremony at nearby Perry High School.



An [FFRF press release](#) also charged that Houston County Schools Superintendent James Hines used the Veterans High School commencement to deliver a "near sermon" to graduating seniors, encouraging them to live with faith in God. The secular group claimed to have received complaints about the event from several of its "members," including a U.S. soldier "who was dismayed by the sectarian musical performance and religious speech he witnessed at his niece's graduation ceremony at Veterans High School."

The FFRF complained that the ceremonies at both high schools "included Christian worship songs: Mark Harris' 'Find Your Wings' was performed at Veterans High School and Chris Tomlin's 'How Great is Our God' was sung at Perry High School."

In a [letter of protest](#) to Hines, FFRF attorney Andrew Seidel stated that public schools "should not be seeking out songs that exclude students and create a divisive environment. Bullying is rampant in schools and on social media and Houston County Schools should be striving to find inclusive, secular songs that all can enjoy without compromising their own personal beliefs."

In his letter, Seidel asked Hines to "take the appropriate steps to ensure that religious rituals are not part of graduation ceremonies or any other school-sponsored events." The atheist attorney somberly counseled the school official that "you as superintendent set the tone for the entire county. That you would not know or honor the Constitution of the United States is shocking."

Just a month later, Seidel was "shocked" again, and the FFRF discovered a veritable gold mine of supposed First Amendment violations when more complaints surfaced over religious expression within the district. According to the [Macon Telegraph](#), a [new letter](#) from the FFRF's Seidel sent to the school district's attorney William Jerles catalogued a plethora of additional "constitutional violations throughout the school system," including, reported the paper, "religious imagery displayed at schools,



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on July 17, 2012

instances of schools partnering with churches, school alma maters or mottos, summer reading recommendations and academic bowl questions ‘inculcating students with ideas about Jesus and God,’ and prayers at various school events — some led by school employees.”

In its own press release, the FFRF laid out the charges against the district more fully, charging that among its most egregious violations were

- Prayers at other school events, such as assemblies, ceremonies, and school council meetings
- Administrators encouraging teachers to pray
- Teachers admitting, with pride, that “we [the teachers] did hold hands and have a prayer around the kids. It was lovely.”
- Religious imagery, such as bible quotes, on school walls and websites
- Schools partnering with churches in close and troubling relationships

In his ponderous tome to the district’s attorney, which ran to 50 pages and included 13 separate enclosures, Seidel wrote that the evidence the FFRF marshaled made it “clear that there is a systemic lack of adherence to and respect for the First Amendment in Houston County Schools. Extensive corrective measures, including training of all HCS employees and administrators on the proper boundaries of the Establishment Clause, are imperative.”

According to the *Macon Telegraph*, Houston County Schools spokeswoman Beth McLaughlin insisted that the district’s June response to the FFRF original attack — that it intends “to comply with the prevailing law in these matters” — still applies. However, she added that the school district had received abundant support from parents and the community since the initial FFRF assault.

The *Telegraph* noted that the school district’s official policy “regarding school ceremonies and observances allows several activities, including ‘playing, singing and presenting music which is religious in its inspiration or origin.’ It notes that while the Supreme Court has declared it illegal to hold formal prescribed religious exercises in public schools, a number of school activities are permitted ‘so long as they do not take on the character of religious devotions.’”



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