

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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November 17, 2011

**SENT VIA U.S. MAIL & FAX
(864) 279-6010**

Dr. Jim Ray
Superintendent
Spartanburg District 3
3535 Clifton Glendale Rd
Glendale, SC 29346

Re: Prayer at Veteran's Day Assembly

Dear Dr. Ray:

I am writing on behalf of a concerned district resident and taxpayer, and other South Carolina members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) who object to the school district holding prayer at school sponsored events. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 17,000 members across the country including over 100 in South Carolina. Our purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

It is our information and understanding that Clifdale Elementary School hosted a Veterans Day ceremony featuring local veterans from the community. Our complainant has informed us that prayer was a part of the program held on November 11, 2011. It is our further understanding that the prayer was given by an elementary school student and that all faculty and students were present for this assembly.

While it is laudable for schools in your District to organize, sponsor and host a Veterans Day assembly, it is very inappropriate to allow Christian or otherwise religious messages to be part of school-sponsored activities such as student assemblies. *See, e.g., Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962)(declared prayers in public schools unconstitutional); *Abington Township Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963)(declared unconstitutional devotional Bible reading and recitation of the Lord's Prayer in public schools); *See also Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992)(ruled prayers at public high school graduations an impermissible establishment of religion); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38 (1985)(overturned law requiring daily "period of silence not to exceed one minute ... for meditation or daily prayer."). In all of the aforementioned cases, the federal courts have struck down prayer in public schools because it constitutes a government-endorsement of religion, which violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

Prayer occurring as part of a regularly scheduled event sponsored by the school certainly leads "an objective observer, acquainted with the [prayer to] perceive it as a state endorsement..." *Sante Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. at 308. This "[s]chool sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible because it sends the ancillary message to members of the audience who are nonadherents 'that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community and accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.'" *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309-10 (2001)(quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. at 668)(O'Connor, J., concurring). Prayer at these programs turns any non-Christian and nonreligious Pillager Public School students into an outsider.

It is unlawful for any school-sponsored event, such as a school-sponsored Veteran's Day assembly, to open with prayer. FFRF asks that you immediately take action to ensure that future programs and assemblies do not open with prayer. We ask that you inform us in writing of the steps your District is taking so that we may notify our complainant.

Sincerely,



Stephanie A. Schmitt
Staff Attorney

Cc: Jan Scott, Principal Clifdale Elementary