

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 · MADISON, WI 53701 · (608) 256-8900 · WWW.FFRF.ORG

October 17, 2011

**SENT VIA U.S. MAIL & FAX
(256) 766-5815**

Superintendent William Valentine
Lauderdale County School District
PO Box 278
355 Co. Rd. 61
Florence, AL 35631

Re: Prayer at District Athletic Events

Dear Mr. Valentine:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to follow up on a letter I sent on September 15, 2011. In that letter we indicated that we had received a complaint from a concerned Lauderdale County School District ("District") resident who objects to prayers that are broadcast before District football games. A copy of the original letter is enclosed for your reference. Unfortunately, we have yet to receive a response indicating the steps you are taking to remove prayer from school sponsored events.

Furthermore, in our original letter, we expressed concern that the practice of giving prayers over the loudspeaker might take place at other District athletic events. This concern has been confirmed. Not only has our complainant informed us that a sectarian Christian prayer was once again offered over the loudspeaker at the Brooks High School homecoming football game, but we have also been informed that a prayer was offered at "micro-midget" elementary school football games. Specifically, it is our information and understanding that prayers were offered at the August 27 Rogers, September 3 Brooks, September 10 Central, September 17 Brooks, September 24 Lexington, and October 1 Brooks games. As you know, all of these schools are in Lauderdale County School District.

It is coercive and inappropriate to ask students to listen while a prayer is delivered at athletic events. This is especially disturbing given the young age of these students. As the Supreme Court in *Lee v. Weisman* explained, "It is a tenet of the First Amendment that the State cannot require one of its citizens to forfeit his or her rights and benefits as the price of resisting conformance to state-sponsored religious practice." 505 U.S. 577, 596 (1992). The Supreme Court also warned that "[t]he State exerts great authority and coercive power...because of the students' emulation of teachers as role models and the children's susceptibility to peer pressure." *Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 U.S. 578, 584 (1987); see also *Ingebretsen v. Jackson Pub. Sch. Dist.*, 864 F.Supp. 1473, 1488 (S.D.Miss.1994). There is immense pressure for students to do as their

instructors and their peers are doing. Public school staff and administrators should be aware of these concerns, and the law, to ensure that all students are made to feel welcome in all school activities. Furthermore, schools must respect the fact that parents, not public schools, are responsible for the religious or nonreligious upbringing of their children.

Lauderdale County Schools must take immediate action to ensure that prayers are not scheduled at any school-sponsored events. Given the egregious nature of these allegations, we expect an immediate reply in writing so that we can notify our complainant about your actions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Stephanie A. Schmitt". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'S'.

Stephanie A. Schmitt
Staff Attorney

Enclosure

CC:

Rogers High School Principal Michael Stamps,
Brooks High School Principal Stephen Howard,
Central School Principal Keith Morris,
Lexington High School Principal Willie Joiner