

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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June 29, 2011

Dr. Dan Brigman
Superintendent
Macon County Schools
1202 Old Murphy Road
Franklin, NC 28734

Re: Nantahala High School Graduation Ceremony Benediction and Sermon

Dear Dr. Brigman:

I am writing on behalf of a North Carolina resident to alert you to a serious state/church violation, which occurred at the Nantahala High School graduation ceremony on June 4, 2011. Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the constitutional principle of separation of church and state. We represent over 16,500 members across the United States, and have an active North Carolina chapter, the Triangle Freethought Society.

Our complainant informed us that this year the graduation ceremony took place on June 4, 2011. It is our understanding that this commencement included a benediction, and a colorful, over-the-top sermon by Reverend Daniel “Cowboy” Stewart. In the sermon, Reverend Stewart extensively quoted from the Bible and spoke of the devil as a roaring lion, alluding to the Book of Peter. Stewart also covered a volunteer student in ropes, and a sack was placed over this student’s head, which Stewart used as a metaphor for how, “The devil is out to destroy you, to tie you up.”

On behalf of our complainant, I respectfully request that you take immediate steps to ensure that religious ritual and proselytizing are not scheduled at future commencement ceremonies. The school district cannot schedule prayer as part of its graduation ceremonies, and it may not invite Reverend Stewart,—who obviously abused his speaking opportunity to proselytize a captive audience—or any other minister, to deliver a sermon in an address to the graduates.

Not only should the District have realized Stewart was apt to view the speaking engagement as a *carte blanche* invitation to abuse the situation to proselytize a captive audience, but the District is on record endorsing his sermon: your very own public statements about the sermon expressed no disapproval.

As you are aware, the Supreme Court has continually struck down prayers at school-sponsored events, including public school graduations. *See Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992)(declaring unconstitutional clergy-delivered prayers at a public school graduation). Even if student-initiated, school officials may not invite a student, teacher, faculty member, or clergy to give any type of prayer, invocation, benediction, or sermon at a public high school graduation. *See Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2000)(holding that student-delivered prayers at high

school football games violate the Establishment Clause). The Supreme Court has settled this matter—high school graduations must be secular to protect the freedom of conscience of all students.

It is also inconsequential that a high school student offers the prayers because student-initiated prayer at school events are illegal. Prayer occurring on public school property as part of a regularly scheduled annual event sponsored by the school certainly leads “an objective observer, acquainted with the [prayer or sermon to] perceive it as a state endorsement...” *Sante Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. at 308. It is also no defense that the student body invited Rev. Stewart, as the graduation was ultimately a school-sponsored event

On behalf of our complainant, I respectfully request that you take immediate steps to ensure that prayer is not scheduled at future commencement ceremonies. What many districts have done to avoid such a problem is adopt a written policy to give to speakers. Please inform me in writing of the steps you are taking to remedy these concerns at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,



Rebecca S. Markert
Staff Attorney

RSM:ask

Enclosure

cc: Mr. Robbie Newton, Principal, Nantahala High School