

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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December 10, 2015

**SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL:
dbridges@naperville203.org**

Mr. Dan Bridges
Superintendent of Schools
Naperville CUSD 203
203 W Hillside Road
Naperville, IL 60540

Re: Coach Participation in Student Prayer

Dear Superintendent Bridges:

Thank you for your prompt investigation and response to our complaint regarding what appeared to be coach-led prayer at a NCHS football game. You assured us that you have instructed coaches at both high schools that they may not lead students in prayer.

We appreciate this assurance, but it does not go far enough. As explained briefly in our original letter, it is unconstitutional for public school employees to *participate in* the religious activities of their students. Any reasonable observer would understand a coach's participation in a religious activity with students as an endorsement of that religious message. As you know, schools are prohibited from *endorsing* a religious message, not just from organizing or leading one.

The Equal Access Act provides one example of the limits on teacher endorsement. It permits teachers to be present at student religious activities "only in a nonparticipatory capacity." This restriction ensures that the school does not illegally endorse students' religious activities. For instance, if teachers participated in a Christian prayer activity, but not in a Buddhist prayer activity, the school would appear to endorse Christianity over Buddhism. For this reason, discretionary teacher participation in students' religious exercises is not a tenable policy. Teachers will invariably favor activities that align with their personal religious views.

A similar instance of a student prayer activity is "See You At The Pole," in which students gather around a school flag pole to pray. Even See You at the

Pole's official website recognizes that adults should not be involved in their events:

See You at the Pole™ is a student-led event. Strong student leadership is crucial. Adult volunteers and parents should not lead the See You at the Pole™ gathering. Many well-meaning adults take over and take away from the students by trying to lead out in the prayers at the flagpole. This is not the intention for See You at the Pole™, nor is it legal for adults to lead. Please step back or stay away and let the students grow and learn in their faith by leading.

The best place for an adult to pray on the day of See You at the Pole™ is not on campus with the students, but at alternate locations.¹

Student prayer during a school-sponsored athletic event is no different. Students are welcome to pray on their own, but school representatives must not participate.

Student athletes are uniquely susceptible to coercion from their coaches. If a coach participates in student prayers of one religion, students will feel pressured to participate. For students who take athletics seriously, gaining their coach's favor may be a paramount goal because coaches have tremendous power over student athletes.

Please follow up your instructions to the high schools' athletic directors to clarify that coaches may not appear to endorse religion by participating in student religious activities. We would once again appreciate a written response. Thank you again for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Ryan D. Jayne, Esq.
Diane Uhl Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation

¹ <http://syatp.com/>.