

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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Statement from FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor

Re: Prayer at Naperville Central High School Football Games

Public high school students are coming to the defense of inappropriate religious conduct by a school authority figure — in this case the coach who makes or breaks their athletic experience. It's not the fault of these students that they do not understand the legal principle being violated when a coach leads, encourages or participates in prayer with student players. That was the job of Naperville Central High School, and it has failed abysmally.

Public schools exist to educate, not indoctrinate. Public school athletes should not be coached to "pray and play the game we love," as the players put it in their statement. This "tradition" is illegal, coercive and divisive. FFRF fully supports a student's right to their own personal religious beliefs, and to pray on their own. We are confident a coach who cares about every student on the team will understand why it crosses the line to pray with students.

No student athlete should be pressured to pray, whether to impress a coach or fellow students. The student statement demonstrates there is an atmosphere in which students are subject to expectations of religious conformity and orthodoxy at Naperville Central. This turns believing Christian students into favored "insiders" and everyone else (minority religionists, such as Jews or Muslims, and nonbelievers) into disfavored "outsiders." Today one in three young persons identifies as nonreligious.

Since 1910, under an Illinois State Supreme Court ruling, bible instruction wisely has been barred in Illinois public schools, with the court noting that "school exercises in which the rest of the school joins, separates him from his fellows, puts him in a class by himself, deprives him of equality with the other pupils, subjects him to religious stigma and places him at a disadvantage in the school." *People ex rel. Ring vs. Board of Education*, 245 Ill. 334 (1910).

More than 65 years ago, in a case originating in Champaign, Ill., the U.S. Supreme Court barred religious instruction in our public schools, involving a case regarding stigmatization of a non believing child, noting: "The public school is at once the symbol of our democracy and the most pervasive means for promoting our common destiny. In no activity of the State is it more vital

to keep out divisive forces than in its schools, to avoid confusing, not to say fusing, what the Constitution sought to keep strictly apart.” *McCollum v. Board of Education* 333 U.S. 203, 232 (1948).

More than a half century ago, the Supreme Court first weighed in against government-imposed school prayer (*Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421, 1962). The high court has since followed such rulings by barring bible readings and recitations in public schools (*Abington Township School District v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203, 1963), moments of silence for the purposes of prayer (*Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 72, 1985), graduation prayers (*Lee v. Weisman*, 120 L.E. 2d 467/ 112 S.C.T. 2649, 1992), and student-led prayers imposed on all students at public school functions, including football games (*Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 2000).

It’s incumbent on Naperville Community Unit School District 203 to step in, and educate not only staff but students, on the importance of keeping religion out of our public schools. FFRF Staff Attorneys would be happy to offer symposia on the law and why it exists to the District, its staff and students.