

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL
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Ms. Carrie Rowe
Superintendent
Beaver Area School District
1300 Fifth Street
Beaver, PA 15009

Re: Thank you for keeping graduation open to all

Dear Superintendent Rowe:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), and the nonreligious students and families within Beaver Area School District, to applaud the district's commitment to maintaining a welcoming, religiously neutral environment at the recent Beaver High School graduation ceremony. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 29,000 members across the country, including more than 850 in Pennsylvania. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional separation of state and church and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

We understand that the district recently received a letter from the Christian advocacy group First Liberty Institute, objecting to the district's policy of reviewing the proposed remarks of designated student speakers prior to graduation. First Liberty is wrong to suggest that the district's policy is illegal. Not only is it legally sound, it is the best way for the district to ensure that its graduation ceremonies do not become religiously or politically charged, which would undermine the ceremony's purpose and potentially ruin a once-in-a-lifetime event for some students and families.

What First Liberty doesn't want to acknowledge is that a graduation ceremony is for *all* students and their families, not just those in the Christian majority. Graduations are not the place for personal religious promotion, just as it would taint the occasion if a commencement's speaker promoted his or her partisan political beliefs while speaking to those assembled.

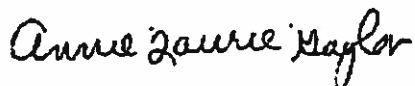
No district would actually want to open up its ceremonies to religious debate by providing graduation speakers with free reign to advance personal and often divisive religious beliefs in the form of devotional remarks. Imagine the uproar and community backlash if a Satanist student chose to deliver a prayer to Lucifer or a Muslim to Allah, focusing on Muhammad as "his only prophet." But that scenario is exactly what the district would be courting if it followed First Liberty's advice and changed its graduation

policy for student speakers. Your students come from all religious and nonreligious walks of life. A ceremony celebrating the culmination of years of secular education and personal achievements should not turn into a preaching contest that excludes and alienates many students and members of the audience. Those who seek religious blessings at their graduation are free to attend private, church-sponsored baccalaureates.

If the district ended up solely with Christian prayers at its graduations, as First Liberty hopes, these Christian prayers would alienate a significant, growing portion of today's high school students. Nationally, 36 percent of younger Americans—those born after 1990, i.e., your students—are nonreligious.¹ Indeed, the “nones” are the fastest growing identification in America.

Again, we thank Beaver Area School District for adopting a fair and rational policy for graduation speakers that respects the right of conscience of all its students. The district's policy should offend no one, as it ensures its ceremonies remain focused on what is most important—celebrating the achievements and bright futures of the graduating class.

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-President
Freedom From Religion Foundation

¹ *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (May 12, 2015), available at www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.