

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

May 26, 2015

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL AND EMAIL TO: ehnes@julesburg.org

Mr. Shawn Ehnes
Superintendent, Julesburg School District RE-1
102 W. 6th Street
Julesburg, CO 80737

Re: Prayer at High School Graduation

Dear Mr. Ehnes:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to alert you to persistent, serious constitutional violations occurring in your district. We were contacted by a concerned resident. As you may recall FFRF is a national nonprofit organization representing more than 22,800 members across the country, including nearly 700 in Colorado and two local groups: the Denver and Colorado Springs FFRF chapters. Our purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

Following our February 27, 2015 letter, you gave us verbal assurances that organized prayer had not taken place at a Julesburg Schools graduation in the past 15 years and that no such prayer would happen again. Specifically, you told me there was “no chance it will happen in the future.” Yet, less than 3 months later, the Julesburg High School graduation ceremony on May 17, 2015 began with a planned, student-led prayer. Please see the attached program and photo. We understand that the prayer began by asking those in attendance to “please stand and bow your heads to pray,” included a quote from the Book of Jeremiah, and ended with “in Jesus we bless our graduation, amen.”

As we already discussed, it is well settled that public schools may not advance, prefer, or promote religion. *See generally Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38 (1985); *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97 (1967); *Sch. Dist. of Abington Twp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962). The Supreme Court has continually struck down prayers at school-sponsored events, including graduations. School officials may not schedule any type of prayer, invocation, or benediction at a public high school-sponsored event. Additionally, it is not a defense that the prayer given at the 2015 Julesburg High School graduation was student-led. *See Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2000) (holding that student-delivered prayers at high school football games violated the Establishment Clause). The Supreme Court has settled this matter—public school events must be secular to protect the freedom of conscience of all students.

Today nearly 30% of adults in the U.S. are non-Christian, and that number is rising. Among millennials, those born between 1981 and 1996, over 43% are non-Christian, either practicing a

minority religion or no religion at all.¹ In Colorado the numbers are greater, 36% of adults are non-Christian, including 29% of Colorado adults that identify as religious “nones.”

Incidentally, the Book of Jeremiah, quoted in the 2015 graduation prayer, is about the Jewish exile in Babylon. In a letter to the Jews in exile, Jeremiah describes the atrocities to be committed by the biblical god against those who disobey him. God promises to punish all the Jews that did not leave Jerusalem in exile with the sword, with famine, and with plague resulting in their desolation.² Further, God vows to kill a false prophet and to kill all of the false prophet’s descendants.³ Legality aside, it is inappropriate to quote, at a high school graduation, a biblical book that punishes disobedience with death and promises to kill innocent children because their parent’s have disobeyed a god.

The blatant and continued disregard for established legal principals by the District is especially alarming given your assurances following our last letter. We now ask for written assurance that public prayers at any District event cease immediately and what steps the District will take to inform District staff of their constitutional obligations regarding religion in public schools. FFRF takes violations of students’ rights of conscience by public schools very seriously. We recently won a federal lawsuit against the Orange County School Board, Florida, and have ongoing federal lawsuits against Emanuel County Schools, Georgia, and the Chino Valley Unified School District, California. However, we prefer to resolve these issues amicably and through education. I look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,



Andrew Seidel
Staff Attorney

ALS:njf

¹ *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center (May 12, 2015) available at www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/

² Jeremiah 29:16-9

³ Jeremiah 29:31-2

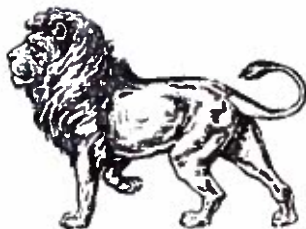
Julesburg Class of Two Thousand Fifteen

Class Motto: "Work hard in silence, let success be your noise." - Frank Ocean

Class Colors: Lime Green, Black, & White

Class Song: "Give Me Back My Hometown" - Eric Church

Class Flower: Gerber Daisy



Julesburg Class of Two Thousand Fifteen



Julesburg High School
Commencement Exercises
Sunday May 17th, 2015
1:30 p.m.
John Grant Gymnasium

Board of Education

Mr. Marvin Trennepohl
Mr. Perry Campbell
Mrs. Jane Kipp

Mrs. Chelle Wasserhuh
Mrs. Ardi Weishaar
Mr. Joshua Lechman

District RE-3

Administration
Mr. Shawn Ehoes

Mrs. Rhonda Palic

Staff

Diane Bell
Brian Boehm
Jennie Boehm
Tye Campbell
Holly Christensen
Brittany Clevenger
Tina Dalton
Cindy Dyer
Kim Ehoes
Karen Engstler
Shorell Fessler
Sara Ferriola
Shawn Ferriola
Ashley Gallentine
Dennis Hill
Betsy Houshauer
Diane Hurst
Julie Ingram
Frank Johnson
Janet Johnson
Jeana Johnson
Kerry Johnson

Sarah Johnson
Paula Kantor
Michelle Kimberly Rhoades
Tim Kraaman
Connie Lechman
Brenda Lechman
Lisa Lindsay
Barbara Mikeson
Gayle Nowth
Bianca Palz
JR Palz
Susan Palz
Susan Peck
Justin Pezza
Amanda Purcell
Teresa Santos
Lori Sirtner
Tamara Super
Joc Stan
Jordan Stone
Nadine Turner
Manlyn Wilber

Ushers

Edgar Valdehara
Zachary Kline

Kayla Sraaver
Alana Temple

Keith Graham

Processional..... "Pomp and Circumstance"
Prayer..... Allison Buchan & Concepcion Gonzalez
Welcome..... Leighta Terry & Victor Lopez
Parent Dedication..... Marin Olson & Jenise Leavitt
Valed. Presentation..... Aubric Hill
Introduction of Salutatorian & Valedictorian..... Mr. Shawn Ehoes
2015 Valedictorian..... Carly Orth
Presentation of Post-Secondary Aspirations..... Mrs. Ehoes
Presentation of Class..... Mr. Ehoes, Mr. Campbell, & Mr. Trennepohl
Presentation of Flowers..... Class of 2015
Recessional..... "Don't You Forget About Me"

