

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

June 6, 2018

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL

larry.ramsey@lbsdk12.com

Mr. Larry Ramsey
Superintendent
Long Beach School District
19148 Commission Road
Long Beach, MS 39560

Re: Scheduled prayer at school-sponsored event

Dear Superintendent Ramsey:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation that recently occurred in Long Beach School District. As you may be aware, FFRF previously wrote the district on September 21, 2017, regarding religious promotion by Long Beach High School's football coach and marching band director, who have reportedly prayed with students and scheduled recitations of the Lord's Prayer for students, respectively. We have yet to receive a response to this 2017 letter. Please address the district's actions regarding these past concerns in addition to the present issue in your written response.

It is our understanding that the district recently hosted its "22nd Annual Superintendent's Academic Awards" ceremony for students at Long Beach High School. We understand that as part of that ceremony, the district scheduled a prayer to be delivered by Long Beach mayor George Bass. At the district's invitation, Mayor Bass led the assembled group of parents, students, and staff in a prayer addressed to "our Father" and concluding, "in Jesus Christ's name, Amen."

We write to ensure that the district does not include scheduled prayers in future school-sponsored events.

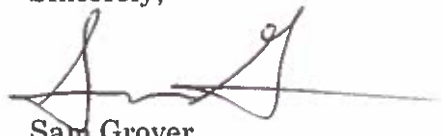
It is unlawful for a school district to schedule prayer at a school-sponsored event like the Superintendent's Academic Awards ceremony. The Supreme Court has continually struck down formal and school-sponsored prayer in public schools. *See, e.g., Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962) (declaring prayers in public schools unconstitutional); *Sch. Dist. of Abington Twp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963) (declaring unconstitutional devotional Bible reading and recitation of the Lord's Prayer in public schools); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992) (ruling prayers at public school graduations an impermissible establishment of religion); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38 (1985) (overturning law requiring daily one minute "period of silence . . . for meditation or daily prayer"). In all of the aforementioned cases, the Supreme Court struck down school-sponsored prayer in public schools because it constitutes a government endorsement of religion, which violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment and interferes with the personal conscience of students.

A prayer taking place at a “regularly scheduled school-sponsored function conducted on school property” would lead an objective observer to perceive it as state endorsement of religion. *See Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 308 (2000). The Court stated that in this context, “Regardless of the listener’s support for, or objection to, the message, an objective . . . student will unquestionably perceive the inevitable . . . prayer as stamped with her school’s seal of approval.” *Id.*

Courts have continually reaffirmed that the First Amendment’s religion clauses are meant to protect the religious freedom of *all* Americans, including minorities. It makes no difference how many people might want prayer or wouldn’t be excluded by prayer at school events, because “fundamental rights may not be submitted to vote; they depend on the outcome of no elections.” *Id.* at 304–05 (quoting *W.Va. Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624, 638 (1943)). “The very purpose of a Bill of Rights was to withdraw certain subjects from the vicissitudes of political controversy, to place them beyond the reach of majorities and officials and to establish them as legal principles to be applied by the courts.” *Barnette*, 319 U.S. at 638. The district has a duty not to promote religion by scheduling religious remarks during its events. By including prayers at school-sponsored events, the district abridges that duty, alienating religious minorities and the 38% of young Americans who are not religious.¹

We ask that you discontinue scheduling prayer at future school-sponsored activities. Please inform us in writing of the steps the district takes to remedy this constitutional violation as well as those addressed in the September 21, 2017 letter. Thank you in advance for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sam Grover', written over a horizontal line.

Sam Grover
Associate Counsel

STG:ces

¹ Robert P. Jones & Daniel Cox, *America’s Changing Religious Identity*, PUBLIC RELIGION RESEARCH INSTITUTE (Sept. 6, 2017), available at www.prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf.