

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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August 31, 2018

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: casey.coffey@nlpanthers.org

Casey Coffey
Superintendent
New Lexington Schools
2549 Panther Drive
New Lexington, OH 43764

Re: Ongoing Unconstitutional Coach-Led Prayer

Dear Superintendent Coffey:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation occurring in New Lexington Schools (NLS). FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 32,000 members across the country, including more than 800 members and a chapter in Ohio. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

We wrote to you in 2015 regarding a cheerleader coach who was leading students in prayer. While we received a response on December 1, 2017, only acknowledging receipt of our letter, we never received a response regarding what actions the District would take to correct this unconstitutional conduct. Now, a concerned resident has reported that coach-led prayer is still occurring in NLS.

A video posted to Facebook shows that on August 24, 2018, one of New Lexington High School's coaches led the football team in reciting the Lord's Prayer.¹ In the video, players are gathered around the coach in a circle holding hands. The coach gives some words of inspiration before leading the entire team in reciting the Lord's Prayer.

As you are aware, it is illegal for public school athletic coaches to lead their teams in prayer. The Supreme Court has continually struck down school-sponsored prayer in public schools. *See, e.g., Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 308 (2000) (holding student-led prayer over the loudspeaker before football games unconstitutional. "Regardless of the listener's support for, or objection to, the message, an objective Santa Fe High School student will unquestionably perceive the inevitable pregame prayer as stamped with her school's seal of approval" because it occurred at a "regularly scheduled school-sponsored function conducted on school property."); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992) (finding prayers at public high school graduations an impermissible establishment of religion); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38 (1985) (overturning law requiring daily "period of silence not to exceed one minute . . . for meditation or daily prayer"); *Sch. Dist. of Abington Twp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963) (holding school-sponsored devotional Bible reading and recitation of the Lord's Prayer unconstitutional); *Engel*

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/stephanie.tharp.18/posts/1876113729093833>

v. Vitale, 370 U.S. 421 (1962) (declaring school-sponsored prayers in public schools unconstitutional).

In each of these cases, the Supreme Court struck down school-sponsored prayer because it constitutes a government advancement and endorsement of religion, which violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

Public school coaches must refrain not only from leading prayers themselves, but also from participating in students' prayers. It is unconstitutional for public school employees to participate in the religious activities of their students. *See, e.g., Bd. of Educ. of the Westside Cmty. Sch. v. Mergens*, 496 U.S. 226, 253 (1990) (finding that public school faculty may only be at student-led religious meetings in a "nonparticipatory capacity"). Federal courts have held that even a public school coach's silent participation in student prayer circles is unconstitutional. *See, e.g., Borden v. Sch. Dist. of the Twp. of East Brunswick*, 523 F.3d 153 (3d Cir. 2008), *cert. denied*, 129 S.Ct. 1524 (2009) (declaring the coach's organization, participation and leading of prayers before football games unconstitutional); *Doe v. Duncanville Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 70 F.3d 402 (5th Cir. 1995) (holding a basketball coach's participation in student prayer circles an unconstitutional endorsement of religion).

In *Borden*, the Third Circuit Court of Appeals held the high school football coach's extensive history of organizing, leading and participating in prayers before games was unconstitutional because it violated the Establishment Clause. *Borden*, 523 F.3d at 174. In that case, the court stated that the coach's involvement in the prayer by "taking a knee" and "bowing his head" during the prayers, even when student-led, "would lead a reasonable observer to conclude he was endorsing religion." *Id.* at 176. The court continued, "if while acting in their official capacities, [school district] employees join hands in a prayer circle or otherwise manifest approval and solidarity with the student religious exercises, they cross the line between respect for religion and the endorsement of religion." *Id.* at 178 (quoting *Duncanville*, 70 F.3d at 406).

The court in *Borden* also rejected the coach's argument that the school district's policy of prohibiting its employees from engaging in prayer with students violated the employees' right to free speech. *Id.* at 174. In fact, the court found that the school district had a right to adopt guidelines restricting this activity because of its concern about potential Establishment Clause violations. *Id.*

This coach's conduct is unconstitutional because he endorses and promotes his religion when acting in his official capacity as a school district employee. Certainly, he represents the school and the team when he acts in his official role as coach of the New Lexington High School football team. Therefore, he cannot lead his team in prayer and he cannot organize or advocate for students to lead team prayer either. When a public school employee acting in an official capacity organizes and advocates for team prayer, he effectively endorses religion on the District's behalf.

We ask that New Lexington School District commence an immediate investigation into the complaint alleged and take immediate action to stop any and all school-sponsored prayers

occurring within any District athletic programs. Please inform us in writing of the steps you are taking to remedy this serious and flagrant violation of the First Amendment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Line". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Christopher Line
Patrick O'Reiley Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation