

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

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SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL:  
kilverc@wp103.org

Dr. Carol L. Kilver  
Superintendent  
West Prairie CUSD 103  
204 S. Hun St.  
Colchester, IL 62326

Re: Thank you for keeping graduation open to all

Dear Superintendent Kilver:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), and the nonreligious students and families within the West Prairie School District, to applaud the district's commitment to maintaining a welcoming, religiously neutral environment at the recent West Prairie High School graduation ceremony. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 33,000 members across the country, including more than 1,000 in Illinois. FFRF's purposes are to protect the constitutional separation of state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

In an "opinion" piece for Fox News, Todd Starnes wrote that West Prairie High School reviewed a draft of a student's graduation ceremony comments and informed the student that he would not be permitted to include proselytizing remarks that were in the draft.<sup>1</sup> The student's full speech was posted on social media and includes the following paragraphs:

I want you to think for a moment, is there any event in history where these four converged in one place? Where did Evil, Justice, Love and Forgiveness converge at a moment in history? **Can I take you to a hill called Calvary and show you the person of Jesus Christ?**

**The Cross of Christ shows us our own evil hearts, that we would put an innocent man up to die.** Christ came to show us God's justice in dealing with the unfairness of the world. **The Cross demonstrates to us** the very love of God who died in our place and how we find at the end of the day that **without his forgiveness we would never make it.**

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<sup>1</sup> Todd Starnes, *Jesus banned – School censors valedictorian's religious speech*, FOX NEWS (May 21, 2018), available at [www.foxnews.com/opinion/2018/05/21/todd-starnes-jesus-banned-school-censors-valedictorians-religious-speech.html](http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2018/05/21/todd-starnes-jesus-banned-school-censors-valedictorians-religious-speech.html).

Graduates, I hope your life is devoid of evil, full of justice, full of love, and full of forgiveness. I think our parents however, could attest that trying to manage this on our own is more than difficult. **The most important thing in your life is to find that intimacy with God. He will guide you, he will hold you, and he will take you through safely in your journey. As you search for goodness, justice, love, and forgiveness, know that only God is big enough to provide that for you.**

(emphasis added). These comments are openly proselytizing, aimed primarily at encouraging non-Christian students to become Christian. The student confirmed this proselytizing intent when he was directly asked whether he was concerned about delivering these remarks to non-Christian graduates: **“It’s impacted my life, and I wanted to share it . . . the hope of Christ with others. I’m going to share that.”**<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, Starnes’ inflammatory opinion piece falsely stated that the prohibited comments were nothing more than a declaration “that [the student] is a follower of Jesus Christ.” It should be noted that Starnes has a widespread reputation for distorting the truth in order to sell a narrative of Christian persecution.<sup>3</sup> As is often the case, local news outlets have adopted Starnes’ misrepresentation of the facts.<sup>4</sup>

We understand that the Christian advocacy group First Liberty Institute is now providing the student legal counsel. In the past, First Liberty has written to school districts under similar circumstances, stating that their policy of reviewing proposed graduation remarks of designated student speakers is illegal.

We write to commend the District on how it handled this situation and to thank the District for protecting the religious rights of *all* of its students. Not only is the District’s policy 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

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<sup>2</sup> Jared DuBach, *West Prairie valedictorian retains counsel after denied ‘religious’ speech*, THE McDONOUGH COUNTY VOICE (May 22, 2018), available at [www.mcdonoughvoice.com/news/20180522/west-prairie-valedictorian-retains-counsel-after-denied-religious-speech](http://www.mcdonoughvoice.com/news/20180522/west-prairie-valedictorian-retains-counsel-after-denied-religious-speech) (emphasis added).

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Jonathan Merritt, *How Todd Starnes Is Compromising Fox News’s Credibility*, THE ATLANTIC (Sept. 14, 2015), available at [www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/how-todd-starnes-is-compromising-fox-news-credibility/405118/](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/how-todd-starnes-is-compromising-fox-news-credibility/405118/) (“Starnes has both a rapidly expanding platform and a long history of journalistic malfeasance.”).

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Grace Runkel, *Valedictorian told not to mention faith at graduation*, OUR QUAD CITIES (May 21, 2018), available at [www.ourquadcities.com/news/valedictorian-told-not-to-mention-faith-at-graduation/1191719449](http://www.ourquadcities.com/news/valedictorian-told-not-to-mention-faith-at-graduation/1191719449).

commencement's speaker promoted his or her partisan political beliefs while speaking to those assembled.

No school 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 changed its graduation policy for student speakers, as First Liberty wants. Your students come from many 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 proselytizing 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.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the "nones" are the fastest growing identification in America.

Again, we thank the West Prairie 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. If you or your attorneys have any questions, the FFRF legal department, which has extensive experience in Establishment Clause matters, would be more than happy to consult with you on this matter. In the event that First Liberty Institute files a lawsuit against the District on this matter, FFRF would be willing to file an *amicus curiae* brief in defense of the District's current policy and practice.

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor  
Co-President  
Freedom From Religion Foundation

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<sup>5</sup> *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (May 12, 2015), available at [www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/](http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/).