

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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July 2, 2013

**SENT VIA U.S. MAIL & FAX (603) 226-2187**

Ms. Christine C. Rath  
Superintendent  
Concord School District  
School Administration Unit 8  
38 Liberty St.  
Concord, NH 03301

Re: Adult Praying on Concord High School Property Daily

Dear Ms. Rath:

Thank you for your reply dated June 17, 2013, to our New Hampshire Right to Know Law Request for information about the decision to allow a district parent, Ms. Lizarda Urena, to enter school grounds daily for the purpose of loudly reciting sectarian prayers.

We write again to express concerns about an adult who regularly prays on school property. It is our information and understanding that Ms. Lizarda Urena has been praying aloud at Concord High School daily since February 2013. Our complainant informs us that Ms. Urena positions herself at the top of the school's stairs and prays out loud and recites Bible verses, for at least fifteen minutes each day. Our complainant also reports that Ms. Urena holds her hands out towards students entering the school building.

According to the information you provided, there was no request for permission to pray at Concord High School made to the School Board. Upon further research, however, we discovered Ms. Urena received some sort of permission from the High School principal.<sup>1</sup>

Allowing Ms. Urena to pray on school property raises a multitude of concerns. First and foremost, it is well settled that public schools may not advance or promote religion, including religious exercise such as prayer. *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 Twshp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962). The purpose of schools is to educate, not to promote religion. Schoolchildren are young, impressionable, and vulnerable to adult and peer pressure. It is the duty of the secular public school system to protect vulnerable children, not to expose them to pressure and prayers. The exercise of religion must be left to the individual and religious education left to the family.

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Ronayne, "Concord High mom prays outside school for peace each day," *Concord Monitor*, May 18, 2013.

In allowing Ms. Urena to pray aloud daily at the entrance to Concord High School, the Concord School District is placing its “stamp of approval” on the religious messages contained in the her prayers. The district need not create an open public forum whereby any individual may take advantage of school resources and a captive student audience to further her personal goals. Such an environment is not conducive to educating young minds and may even appear hostile to those who disagree with a third party’s message.

Allowing adults, not facilitated by or through school personnel, to enter school property during the school-day to interact with children is shocking. This implies that strange adults, who happen to have religious motives, have unregulated access to young children at school. With tragedies at school and parents’ appropriate worry over adult contact with children, it is incredible that the District would allow this practice.

We and all parents who value the education and safety of students in public schools must oppose the current visitor practices because of the terrible precedent it creates. The Concord High School visitor policy requires adult visitors to sign in at the principal’s office, state the purpose of the visit, receive a visitor’s pass, and sign out once the visit is complete. We are unaware of whether Ms. Urena is following these procedures, but it seems unlikely given her intentions with her daily visits. It is the District’s constitutional duty to avoid violating the Establishment Clause of the U.S. Constitution by showing preference to Christianity over other religions—or religion over nonreligion. If the Concord School District permits one sectarian and exclusionary religious message to be delivered on public school property by an individual unaffiliated with school business, the District will have to permit other private individuals with no educational purpose to enter school property.

The District should not to allow Ms. Urena to continue her practice of praying on school property each day. We ask that you promptly inform us, in writing, of the steps you are taking to remedy these constitutional concerns so that we may notify our complainants.

Sincerely,



Rebecca S. Markert  
Staff Attorney

RSM:jdg

cc: Attorney John Teague