

After court ruling, activists push prayer into schools

They say church and state are already too separate

By [Hannah Natanson](#)

July 26, 2022 at 6:00 a.m. EDT

A Michigan superintendent is pondering whether coaches should lead students in pre-game prayer. A school board member in Florida wants her district to teach students about prayer and offer religious studies. In Hawaii, the leader of a faith- and family-focused activism group sees a path to altering state policy that says public-school employees cannot initiate prayer on campus.

A month has passed since the Supreme Court ruled in favor of a Washington state football coach who knelt at midfield to pray and was joined by student-athletes. The court wrote, in a 6-3 decision, that Bremerton High School assistant coach Joseph Kennedy's prayers were protected by the Constitution's guarantees of free speech and religious exercise, and that the district was wrong to discipline him for what the majority saw as a private act.

In response, families, teachers and activists are preparing to push religious worship into public schools nationwide — working to blur the line dividing prayer and pedagogy and promising emotional, spiritual and educational benefits for students. Some school officials are listening: In at least three states, Illinois, Alabama and Oregon, school personnel have said they are reviewing their policies on employee prayer.

“Our nation has lost its way in having lost a belief of a higher power,” said Christi Fraga, a Miami-Dade school board member who in May successfully proposed establishing an annual day of prayer in her district. “So in my community, there has been a cry for help — a cry to allow prayer in our schools.” Fraga added of the court's ruling: “I hope it brings back our country to its foundation.”

Those who say faith should play a role in public schools are thrilled with their gains and eager to push for more next school year. They cite not only the court's decision for Kennedy but also a June ruling in which the court declared that Maine cannot prevent religious schools from receiving public tuition grants permitted for other private schools.

In other places, though, educators say not much will change — largely because coach-led prayer at games and invocations before school board meetings were already happening.

The fiercest advocates for church-state separation also concede they were fighting an uphill battle even before the court's ruling. Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-founder of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, said many districts routinely ignore the string of 1960s and 1970s Supreme Court decisions establishing that public schools cannot require students to recite prayers, cannot allow teachers to lead students in prayer and generally cannot promote or inhibit religion at school.

Gaylor said her foundation, a nonprofit founded in the late 1970s, is constantly fighting back against coaches who lead prayers with students at school or school officials who schedule prayer into the school day. In an average year, school incidents make up 50 percent of the group's caseload, she said.

"We were mopping up anyway; it was like whack-a-mole," Gaylor said.

Some mothers and fathers also fear what the next school year may bring. Those who practice non-Christian religions warn that, in most of America, "prayer" will by default mean Christian prayer, leaving their children alienated and isolated — while those who do not practice any faith worry their children will be coerced into espousing values and beliefs their parents do not share.

Among them is Kristi Robertson, a 33-year-old atheist in Oklahoma whose daughter discovered God and Christianity when her third-grade public-school teacher led the class in daily prayer. Four years later, Aurora, alone in her family, still prays and goes to church.

"There is nothing I can do about that now; she has made her choices to be religious," Robertson said. "And if she's invited to pray at school, she's going to. If I do hear about it, I would probably complain again — but for other students. It is too late for her."

'A little bit of a spirit helps you'

Bill DeFrance, superintendent of Eaton Rapids Public Schools in Michigan, has moonlighted for years as a high school soccer referee. When religious schools compete, he has listened as coaches intone team prayers before and after a game. Still, he has never seen a public-school coach lead a prayer.

But in light of the Supreme Court ruling, and pending guidance from state officials, DeFrance said he is open to the idea of coach-led prayer.

If the Michigan Department of Education or the Michigan High School Athletic Association "said they'd like to work ... about how you can incorporate prayer into sports events for kids, I'd certainly take it to the [school] board to say, 'We could help pilot this; we could try this,'" DeFrance said. (A spokesman for the state athletic association emailed The Washington Post, saying: "This is strictly an individual school district issue in Michigan. We have no part in this decision-making process." A spokesman for the Education Department wrote in an email that his agency "has not sent any guidance to local school districts on this issue at this time. We have made a request of our state attorney general's office for a review of the decision.")

If done well, DeFrance added, coach-led prayer could yield advantages for his district's 2,000 students, serving as a way to learn about other cultures.

"I could see some real interesting things like, 'Okay, Bill, you're Hindu, you lead the prayer this week,' and give some background about why Hindus pray," he said. Plus, "I do think sometimes having a little bit of a spirit helps you to play."

In Hawaii, Eva Andrade, president and chief executive of faith-based activist group the Hawaii Family Forum, is also eyeing ways to introduce prayer into schools and school competitions. People of faith feel unsafe at school, Andrade said, threatened by a 1947 Hawaii Board of Education policy that prohibits “prayer and other religious observances ... organized or sponsored by schools.” The Supreme Court ruling, she said, offers the first chance in decades to change that policy — and her group is determined to take advantage of the opportunity.

“I would like them to allow people to bring their faith into their position without any fear,” Andrade said.

State-level advocacy is afoot in other places, too: In Ohio, an hour after the Supreme Court’s ruling was published, Lt. Gov. Jon Husted urged school districts to review and update their policies on school prayer. And a few months before the ruling, in Kentucky, a Republican lawmaker and a Lexington rabbi teamed up on a bill requiring public-school students to silently pray, meditate or reflect in class.

Florida passed a similar law in June 2021 that requires a moment of silence each day. Although the law drew strong criticism from advocates of church-state separation, it thrilled Fraga, who persuaded her colleagues to hold a National Day of Prayer every May for the district’s roughly 330,000 students.

Fraga’s original proposal suggested school employees facilitate prayer-related events and programs. In an interview, she said she envisioned teachers taking the day to instruct students about the history of prayer and how different faiths worship.

Board vice chair Steve Gallon III, fearing violation of the Constitution, offered an amendment watering down the proposal. The version that passed in mid-April, Gallon said in an interview, simply “provides an opportunity for students to freely assemble and express themselves in honor of the National Day of Prayer. ... Staff also has the right to do that, during non-duty times.”

Fraga still does not understand why it’s okay for the district to recognize LGBTQ History Month, with school-hosted events and celebrations, but not do something similar about prayer. Although she is running for mayor of the city of Doral and plans to leave the school board in November, she intends to continue her education advocacy — bolstered by the Supreme Court ruling, she says it may be possible to introduce more religion classes into public schools.

“I would love to see there be the ability to implement more religious teachings,” Fraga said. “There’s lessons that are taught right now in school that maybe certain families do not believe in, [and] students have to sit there and listen to what history has brought us to.”

Why not, she asked, also offer lessons on the Christianity, the “religion that has formed our nation”? As well as “the different types of religion,” she added.

‘I thought it was required’

In other places, educators are struggling to understand the fuss about the Supreme Court ruling, because prayer has long been part of sports events and school board meetings.

Amy Kruppe took over as superintendent in Hazel Park Schools, Mich., seven years ago. When she arrived from Illinois, she was surprised to find that school board members opened meetings with prayer — sometimes inviting “a man of the cloth” to lead proceedings.

“I said, ‘Wait a minute, this is not constitutional,’ ” Kruppe said. “But their feeling was it was important to them as an organization” — so to this day, the board opens its meetings with Christian prayer, Kruppe said.

Over the years, Kruppe has come around to the idea. There have never been complaints, apart from hers. She said coaches in Hazel Park also lead prayers at games, “and no one says anything about it.” She noted that Hazel Park, a district of about 3,200 students, is about 50 percent White, 50 percent Black and, as far as she can tell, nearly 100 percent Christian.

“I really think it’s the environment, the community you’re in,” Kruppe said. The ruling “just gives some individuals that might have already been doing it anyway the freedom to say, ‘It’s okay.’ ”

Steven Fogg, who sits on the school board of Clovis Unified School District in California, said coaches in his district of 43,000 encourage prayer in a wink-wink-nod-nod sort of way. For example, the coach of his son’s high school football team allowed players five minutes of pre-game “team time,” widely understood as time for student-led prayer.

Fogg said his school board used to open its meetings with prayer — until 2019, when they received a cease-and-desist letter from the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

“So we just moved our prayer to have it before the school board meeting, in a setting where there are no students,” Fogg said. He added that although the Supreme Court ruling will probably make religious employees less fearful to be themselves at school, it “changes nothing” policy-wise “because we already have a strong faith-based school board and administration and many of our coaches.”

Others, though, are appalled by what they see as an erosion of the boundary between church and state.

In Salt Lake City, 50-year-old Thayne Warner is remembering his son’s struggles in high school, when his football coach called on players to pray before every game and at team dinners. The family lived in Aurora, Colo., at the time, and Warner — a former Mormon, now an atheist — grew angry when he saw how the tradition was affecting his boy.

“He had been called on to pray and had to decline and felt terrible afterwards, because he didn’t really know how to pray in the way that everyone else was praying — Mormon praying is somewhat different,” Warner said. “He felt like everyone was looking at him and judging him for not participating.”

Things got so bad, he said, that his son considered quitting the team. Incensed, Warner filed a complaint in 2016 with the help of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. The prayer ceased, and the coach was later fired.

Warner’s three older children are past school-age, and his two youngest do not play sports. But the Supreme Court’s ruling has him worried for other students. He says it will be difficult — maybe impossible — for other parents to act like he did.

“I just think students like my son are just going to be further put in an uncomfortable position,” Warner said.

And in Oklahoma, Kristi Robertson is concerned that more families will undergo what hers did.

Robertson contacted the Freedom From Religion Foundation soon after her daughter told her about the third-grade teacher’s prayers, in which she was taught to thank Jesus for things like sunny days and good classroom behavior. The foundation submitted a complaint to the Mid-Del School District in May of 2019.

The family has since switched school districts, and Robertson is unsure what happened to the teacher, if anything. Rick Cobb, superintendent of the Mid-Del district, wrote in an email that he spoke “with school staff about the situation” but declined to share any more information, writing, “We do not discuss disciplinary issues involving students or employees.”

But she knows how the experience changed her daughter. On a video call, sitting beside her mother, Aurora said she enjoys praying and going to church with her best friend, a girl named Maria. She said that she believes in God and that she began believing in God when her third-grade teacher talked about God in class.

“The teacher, she said, ‘He is always watching you and offering forgiveness and stuff,’ ” Aurora said. At first, she thought praying “was a little weird, but I went along with it because I thought it was required.”