

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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December 13, 2019

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: comohundro@edcounsel.law

Emily A. Omohundro
EdCounsel, LLC
2401 Bernadette Drive, Suite 117
Columbia, MO 65203

Re: Football Chaplain at Jackson High School (Jackson R-2 School District)

Dear Ms. Omohundro:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation occurring at Jackson High School in the Jackson R-2 School District. It is my understanding that you represent the District. Please let me know if that is no longer the case.

A concerned area resident has reported that Chris Collier, a youth specialist with the Missouri Division of Youth Services, has been acting as a football chaplain for the Jackson High School football team. An article recently posted online explains that for the past 10 years, Mr. Collier has been leading the team in prayer before and after each game.¹ The article also explains how the previous head coach of the team, Van Hitt, started this chaplaincy program, “Hitt’s idea, Collier recalled, was to create a designated spiritual leader to take some pressure of the head coach.”²

As you are aware, it is illegal for a public school to organize, sponsor, or lead prayers at public high school athletic events. Public school football teams cannot appoint or employ a chaplain, seek out a spiritual leader for the team, or agree to have a volunteer team chaplain, because public schools may not advance or promote religion. *See generally, Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 530 U.S. 290; *Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577; *Wallace*, 472 U.S. 38; *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97 (1967); *Sch. Dist. of Abington Twshp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel*, 370 U.S. 421. Thus, it is inappropriate for Mr. Collier to lead the Jackson High School football team in prayer before and after games, or at any other school-sponsored function.

The District cannot allow a non-school adult access to the children in its charge, and it certainly cannot grant that access to a religious speaker seeking to organize prayer for the students, because “the preservation and transmission of religious beliefs and worship is a

¹ <https://www.semoball.com/story/2653486.html>

² *Id.*

responsibility and a choice committed to the private sphere.” *Santa Fe*, 530 U.S. at 310 (quoting *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. at 589).

This school endorsement of Christianity is particularly troubling for those parents and students who are non-religious or not Christian. The “[s]chool sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible because it sends the ancillary message to members of the audience who are nonadherents ‘that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community and accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.’” *Id.* (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. at 668)(O’Connor, J., concurring).

We ask that the District commence an immediate investigation into the complaint alleged and take action to stop any and all school-sponsored prayers occurring within District athletic programs. The District must ensure that it is no longer allowing religious leaders to have access to its students. The team may no longer allow Mr. Collier, or anyone else, to act as a team chaplain. Please inform us in writing of the steps the District is taking to remedy this serious and flagrant violation of the First Amendment.

Sincerely,



Christopher Line
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation