

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: anthony.barber@ssdcougars.org

Dr. Anthony Barber
Superintendent
Springfield School District
111 West Leamy Avenue
Springfield, PA 19064

Re: Repeated Recitation of “God Bless America” in Elementary School

Dear Superintendent Barber:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation occurring in the Springfield School District. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 31,000 members across the country, including more than 900 members in Pennsylvania. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

A concerned Springfield School District parent has reported that Sabold Elementary School proclaims “God Bless America” over the loudspeaker following the Pledge of Allegiance each morning.

The Establishment Clause in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibits government sponsorship of religious messages. The Supreme Court has said time and again that the “First Amendment mandates government neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.” *McCreary Cnty., Ky. v. Am. Civil Liberties Union of Ky.*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985); *Epperson v. Ark.*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15-16 (1947). This constitutional mandate is stronger within the context of our public schools.

The repeated recitation of a religious message in the school setting violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which prohibits public schools from advancing, supporting, or promoting religion. “God Bless America” is a prayer. The song that the phrase originates from begins, “As we raise our voices in a solemn prayer.” A prayer hosted by a publicly-supported school does not pass constitutional muster. The phrase “God Bless America,” repeatedly uttered by a public school, amounts to a declaration of orthodoxy in religion that falsely equates patriotism with piety.

When a public school regularly proclaims, “God Bless America,” it sends a message to its students that the school is endorsing and compelling belief in God. This excludes the 38% of Americans born after 1987—i.e. your students—who are not religious.¹ Courts have observed

¹ Robert P. Jones & Daniel Cox, *America’s Changing Religious Identity*, PUBLIC RELIGION RESEARCH INSTITUTE (Sept. 6, 2017), available at www.ppri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf.

that young students are particularly prone to believing that a religious message is school endorsed. Because this is taking place in an elementary school, the District must consider how the messages it sends are perceived by its youngest, most impressionable students, who are a captive audience.

By endorsing a belief in a god, the school sponsors a religious message that is “impermissible because it sends the ancillary message to . . . nonadherents ‘that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.’” *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309-10 (2000) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (O’Connor, J., concurring)).

Sabold Elementary School’s practice of proclaiming “God Bless America” each day must cease immediately. Please inform us in writing of the actions you are taking to remedy this constitutional violation so that we may inform our complainant.

Sincerely,



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