

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

July 27, 2023

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: kmcburnett@burnetcisd.net

Keith McBurnett
Superintendent
Burnet CISD
208 East Brier
Burnet, TX 78611

Re: Unconstitutional religious promotion

Dear Superintendent McBurnett:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation occurring in Burnet CISD (the District). FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 40,000 members across the country, including more than 1,700 members and a chapter in Texas. 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 complainant reported that the District is encouraging community members to “pray for the first day” of classes by praying for a specific group of people each day from July 26, 2023 to the first day of classes on August 16. The District promoted the daily prayers in a post on its official Facebook page. Please see the enclosed screenshot of the post.

We write to request that the District cease promoting prayer and remove this post from its official social media.

It is well settled that public schools may not show favoritism towards or coerce belief or participation in any religion. *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2000); *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 Twp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *McCullum v Bd. of Ed.*, 333 U.S. 203 (1948).

Government-sponsored religious exercise “has the improper effect of coercing those present to participate in an act of religious worship.” *Santa Fe*, at 312. Here, the District is displaying clear favoritism towards religion over nonreligion by promoting and encouraging prayer.

The District serves a diverse community that consists of not only religious students, families, and employees, but also atheists, agnostics, and those who are simply religiously unaffiliated. By promoting prayer, the District sends an official message that excludes all nonreligious District students and community members. Thirty-seven percent of the American population is

non-Christian, including the almost 30 percent¹ who are nonreligious. At least a third of Generation Z (those born after 1996) have no religion², with a recent survey revealing almost half of Gen Z qualify as “nones” (religiously unaffiliated).³

The District must cease promoting prayer and refrain from doing so in the future. Additionally, we ask that the District remove the post from its official Facebook account. Please respond in writing with the steps the District is taking to address this situation. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Samantha F. Lawrence". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Samantha F. Lawrence
Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure

¹ Gregory A. Smith, *About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated*, Pew Research Center (Dec. 14, 2021), www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/.

² Samuel J. Abrams, *Perspective: Why even secular people should worry about Gen Z's lack of faith*, Deseret News (Mar. 4, 2023), www.deseret.com/2023/3/4/23617175/gen-z-faith-religious-nones-civic-life-volunteers-charity

³ 2022 Cooperative Election Study of 60,000 respondents, analyzed by Ryan P. Burge www.religioninpublic.blog/2023/04/03/gen-z-and-religion-in-2022/.



Burnet CISD

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Join us beginning tomorrow as we pray to the first day...



**BACK TO
SCHOOL**



BURNET
Consolidated ISD

Pray to the First Day

July 26- Burnet HS

July 27- Quest HS

July 28- Burnet MS

July 29- Bertram ES

July 30- Shady Grove ES

July 31- RJ Richey ES

August 1- Board of Trustees

August 2- Food Service Staff

August 3- Transportation Staff

August 4- Maintenance Staff

August 5- Custodial Staff

August 6- Grounds Staff

August 7- Coaches/Directors/Sponsors

August 8- Parents/Guardians

August 9- Counselors, Nurses & Librarians

August 10- Substitutes

August 11- Instructional Partners

August 12- Administrators

August 13- School Resource Officers

August 14- Office Staffs

August 15- Teachers

August 16- First Day of School: *Students* for Safety & Wisdom