

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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October 23, 2023

**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: shannon.lafargue@cpsb.org**

Superintendent Shannon LaFargue  
Calcasieu Parish School Board  
3310 Broad Street  
Lake Charles, LA 70615

Re: Unconstitutional teacher proselytizing

Dear Superintendent LaFargue:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation occurring in the Calcasieu Parish School Board (CPSB). FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 40,000 members across the country, including members in Louisiana. 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 parent reported that their child's kindergarten teacher at Bell City High School, [REDACTED] [REDACTED], has been teaching students the Lord's Prayer. We are told that [REDACTED] leads the class in reciting Lord's Prayer every school day before the class goes to lunch.

We write to request that CPSB immediately investigate this situation and ensure that [REDACTED] and all other teachers refrain from leading students in prayer and promoting their personal religious beliefs in the classroom.

Students have the First Amendment right to be free from religious indoctrination in their public schools. It is well settled that public schools may not show favoritism towards or coerce belief or participation in religion. *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). "It is beyond dispute that, at a minimum, the Constitution guarantees that government may not coerce anyone to support or participate in religion or its exercise." *Lee*, at 587 When a kindergarten teacher abuses [REDACTED] position to coerce young students to pray, that teacher violates students' First Amendment rights. [REDACTED]'s actions have undeniably crossed the constitutional line.

CPSB has an obligation to ensure that its teachers are not using their positions to indoctrinate students. Certainly, "a school can direct a teacher to 'refrain from expressions of religious viewpoints in the classroom and like settings.'" *Helland v. S. Bend Comm. Sch. Corp.*, 93 F.3d 327 (7th Cir. 1993) (quoting *Bishop v. Arnov*, 926 F.2d 1066, 1077 (11th Cir. 1991)). The Supreme Court has recognized that "[f]amilies entrust public schools with the education of their children, but condition their trust on the understanding that the classroom will not purposely be used to advance religious views that may conflict with the private beliefs of the student and his

or her family.” *Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 U.S. 578, 584 (1987). Parents have the Constitutional right to determine their children’s religious or nonreligious upbringing. Here, [REDACTED] has violated the trust that our complainant and all other parents place in CPSB’s teachers to follow the Constitution and refrain from imposing their own religious beliefs on the children they teach.

It is important to note that this case is readily distinguishable from the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*. In *Bremerton*, the Court held that a high school football coach’s silent, private post-game prayer was constitutional. 142 S.Ct. 2407, 2415–16 (2022). Throughout its opinion, the Court repeatedly stressed that the coach silently prayed alone. *Id.* (the coach “offered his prayers quietly while his students were otherwise occupied.”). The prayers “were not publicly broadcast or recited to a captive audience. Students were not required or expected to participate.” *Id.* at 2432. Additionally, the Court concluded the coach’s quiet private prayer was private speech. *Id.* at 2423–24. (the coach’s prayer was not given while he was performing official duties such as instructing players, discussing strategy, or encouraging better performance). In contrast, [REDACTED] is coercing a captive audience of young school children to participate in Christian prayer each school day while acting in [REDACTED] official capacity as a public school teacher.

In order to respect students’ First Amendment rights, CPSB must investigate this situation and ensure that [REDACTED] and all other teachers refrain from leading students in prayer or promoting their religious beliefs in the classroom. Please respond in writing with the steps CPSB is taking to address this constitutional violation so that we may inform our complainant. 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 written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial 'S'.

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