

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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November 10, 2021

**SENT VIA U.S. MAIL AND EMAIL**

**greg.ebeling@pellaschools.org**

Greg Ebeling  
Superintendent  
Pella Community School District  
210 E. University Street  
Pella, IA 50219

Re: Unconstitutional Religious Promotion by Coach

Dear Superintendent Ebeling:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation occurring in the Pella Community School District. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 35,000 members, including more than 225 members in Iowa. 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 contacted us regarding religious promotion by the Pella Middle School football coach. Nick Fynaardt has sent emails to football players such as: “God has made each of you unique. . . .” He has also mailed notes to the players, which included a bible verse. A screenshot of an email is enclosed.

The District violates the Constitution when it sponsors religious messages. It is well-settled law that public schools may not advance or promote religion. *See generally, 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); *McCollum v Bd. of Ed.*, 333 U.S. 203 (1948).

Courts have continually held that school districts may not display religious messages in public schools. *See, e.g., Stone v. Graham*, 449 U.S. 39 (1980) (ruling that the Ten Commandments may not be displayed on classroom walls); *Lee v. York County*, 484 F.3d 689 (4th Cir. 2007) (ruling that a teacher may be barred from displaying religious messages on classroom bulletin boards); *Washegesic v. Bloomington Pub. Schs.*, 33 F. 3d 679 (6th Cir. 1994) (ruling that a picture of Jesus may not be displayed in a public school). Although Coach Fynaardt is sending religious messages, instead of displaying them in a classroom, the analysis is the same. He cannot use his pedestal as a public school coach to promote his religious beliefs and, when Coach Fynaardt speaks to his team, he is speaking in his official capacity as an employee of the District.

A football coach has unique access to students and this access cannot be abused to evangelize. As the Supreme Court has recognized, “[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). Middle school students cannot be an audience for a coach’s evangelizing simply because they desire to be part of a football team.

By allowing a coach to promote his Christian views, the District alienates non-Christian students, teachers, and parents whose religious beliefs are inconsistent with his, including the 38% of Americans born after 1987 who are not religious.<sup>1</sup> By promoting Christianity, the school-sponsored football team sends a message that a religious belief is preferred, which is prohibited by the Establishment Clause. *See Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309-10 (2000) (“School 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 an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.’” *Id.* at 309 (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 699 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring))).

We request that the District investigate the complaint alleged and take action to ensure there will be no further religious promotion to football players. Coaches and school staff should be educated regarding their constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion while acting in their official capacities. Please respond in writing detailing the steps the District is taking to comply with the First Amendment.

Sincerely,



Karen M. Heineman  
*Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow*  
*Freedom From Religion Foundation*

Enclosure

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<sup>1</sup> 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](http://www.ppri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf).

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Young Men,

Thank you so much for your efforts this past football season! This was definitely a learning and growing experience for all of us! We, as coaches, have watched you grow and develop your athletic skills and teamwork throughout the season. You have also learned some very important lessons: What it means to make a commitment to be a team member, the responsibility of getting your school assignments completed, that sometimes you will fail-but you can always get back up and try again, that you need to listen when coaches and teachers are giving instructions, and that you need to take responsibility for your words and actions.

We hope that you have had fun in the journey we have taken this year, and that you have grown as a person because of it. We would also like to take this time to say that if you want to keep improving as an athlete, there are many things you can do to get better: Going out for wrestling is a great idea and/or basketball in the winter, and especially going out for track in the spring. You need to stay active! Additionally you can keep doing push-ups, sit-ups, bodyweight squats, jump squats, anything to get bigger, faster, stronger. We are sure that you can find many more options on the internet.

Lastly, please know that we love each of you for who you are and not for what you can do on the field. God has made each of you unique and we are so excited to watch you continue growing as high quality men in our world someday! My hope is that you continue to uphold the weekly challenges we had even though football is done for this season. We loved getting to work with you this season, and it truly was an honor to be your coaches!

Sincerely,  
Coaches Fynaardt, Garland, Van Dyke, Lester, &  
Finney