

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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June 4, 2021

**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: [wes.bridges@polk-fl.net](mailto:wes.bridges@polk-fl.net)**

Wes Bridges  
General Counsel  
Polk County Public Schools  
P.O. Box 391  
Bartow, FL 33831

Re: Football Chaplain at Haines City High School (Polk County Public Schools)

Dear Mr. Bridges:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding another constitutional violation occurring in Polk County Public Schools. We are still awaiting a response to our November 6, 2020 letter regarding religious promotion occurring in the District and several letters regarding previous issues reported in the District. We would like to work with the District to address these issues rather than taking further action. Please respond as soon as practicable with how the District has addressed the issues we have previously raised and how it plans to address this new issue as well.

It is our understanding that Matt Norman, the husband of a Polk County Public Schools employee, is acting as a chaplain for the Haines City High School football team. Please see the attached screenshot, which shows Matt Norman explaining, “I am super excited to be serving HCHS as the football team’s chaplain.”

Public school football teams cannot appoint or employ a chaplain, seek out a spiritual leader for the team, or agree to allow someone to act as chaplain, because public schools may not promote religion. *See generally, Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 530 U.S. 290 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38 (1985); *Epperson v. Ark.*, 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). It is therefore inappropriate and illegal for the Haines City High School football team to have a team chaplain, as this signals a blatant promotion of religion over nonreligion generally, and in this case, Christianity in particular.

Polk County Public Schools cannot give a non-school affiliated adult access to the children in its charge, and it certainly cannot grant that access to a minister to advance his faith. The Supreme Court has repeatedly held that public schools may not be co-opted, either by staff or outside adults, to proselytize students. *McCullum v. Bd. of Educ.*, 333 U.S. 203, 210 (1948) (holding that the Constitution forbids the “utilization of the tax-established and tax-supported public school system to aid religious groups to spread their faith”). Federal courts have accordingly enforced

injunctions against school districts who, by action or inaction, grant outside adults access to other peoples' children to evangelize. *See, e.g., Roark v. South Iron R-1 Sch. Dist.* 540 F. Supp.2d 1047, 1059 (E.D. Mo., 2008); *upheld in relevant part by* 573 F.3d 556, (8th Cir. 2009) (holding that school policy allowing evangelical Christian organization to distribute bibles in school violated Establishment Clause).

It is beyond the scope of a public school system to officially endorse a position whose responsibilities include advocating Christianity to students. "The preservation and transmission of religious beliefs and worship is a responsibility and a choice **committed to the private sphere.**" *Santa Fe*, 530 U.S. at 310 (quoting *Weisman*, 505 U.S. at 589) (emphasis added). Endorsement of Christianity within the District's athletic programs is particularly troubling for those parents and students who are not Christians or do not subscribe to any religion. 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 an 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). With 30% of Americans now being non-Christian, this likely represents a significant number of children and families in your community.<sup>1</sup>

We ask that the District take immediate action to end any official chaplaincy program at Haines City High School. We further request that all coaches be reminded that they may not promote religion while acting in their official capacity, nor enlist an outside adult to do the same. Please inform us in writing of the steps the District is taking to remedy this violation of the First Amendment so that we may notify our complainant.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Line". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Christopher Line  
Staff Attorney  
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 (2017), available at: <https://www.ppri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf>



**Matt Norman** is with Kimberly Stephens Norman.

May 21 at 2:16 PM · 🌐

I'm super excited to be serving HCHS as the football team's chaplain.

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