

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: kengle@prague.k12.ok.us**

Kevin Engle  
Superintendent  
Prague Public Schools  
1100 Bluebell 3504 NBU  
Prague, OK 74864

Re: Unconstitutional Daily Prayers in Elementary School

Dear Superintendent Engle:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a serious constitutional violation currently occurring in Prague Public Schools. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including members in Oklahoma. 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 District community member has reported that Prague Elementary School has been hosting daily prayers during its morning announcements. It is our understanding that the District has also been promoting these school-sponsored prayers on its official Facebook page. The “Prague Public Schools” Facebook page regularly posts the photos and full names of students who have “asked if they could pray.” Please see the enclosed screenshots.

It is extremely concerning that the District not only hosts daily prayers as part of “Rise and Shine,” but that it then posts the full name and photos of students who led the prayer so that they can receive accolades from the community for adhering to the majoritarian religious belief. The District must cease hosting daily prayers and promoting religious worship through its official communication channels immediately.

The First Amendment prohibits a public school from hosting or sponsoring prayer, even if it is “student-led.” The Supreme Court has continually struck down formal and school-led prayer in public schools. *See, e.g., Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992) (ruling prayers at public school graduations an impermissible establishment of religion); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38 (1985) (overturning law requiring daily one minute “period of silence . . . for meditation or daily prayer”); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962) (declaring prayers in public schools unconstitutional). More than fifty-five years ago, the Supreme Court held it was unconstitutional for schools to allow students to use a school’s intercommunications systems to conduct daily opening exercises “consisting primarily of the ‘reading, without comment, of a chapter in the Holy Bible and/or the use of the Lord’s Prayer.’” *Abington Twp. Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203, 211 (1963).

Even when student-initiated, which this daily practice is most certainly not given the age of the students and the District’s active participation in organizing and promoting it, the Supreme Court has found school

sponsorship of prayers unconstitutional. *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 308 (2000) (striking down a school policy that authorized students to vote on whether to hold a prayer at high school football games). The Court reasoned that because the football game was a school-sponsored event, hosting prayer was a constitutional violation. *Id.* at 307. Even if student-led, the Court found that prayers at a “regularly scheduled school-sponsored function conducted on school property” would lead an objective observer to perceive it as state sponsorship of religion. *Id.* at 308. This case is more egregious because Prague Elementary School is hosting prayer in an elementary school during the school day when all students and employees are required to be present. Even if students are truly “asking” to deliver the official daily prayers, they are only doing so because the school has established the practice and is actively allowing and promoting this in-school religious worship. In any case, the school cannot allow prayer to be broadcast via the school-controlled loudspeaker to a captive audience of students.

“School sponsorship of a religious message 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.’” *Id.* at 309-10 (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. at 668 (O’Connor, J., concurring)). Hosting official daily school prayers, and then publicly celebrating those students who participate alienates nonreligious students, employees, and families whose religious beliefs are inconsistent with the message being promoted by the District, including the almost 30 percent of Americans who are nonreligious.<sup>1</sup> 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).

A public school must not host official daily prayers even if it is students delivering these prayers. The Constitution obligates public schools to maintain religious neutrality to respect the right of conscience of its students and their families. Please inform us in writing of the actions the District is taking to remedy this serious constitutional violation so that we may inform our complainant.

Sincerely,



Christopher Line  
Staff Attorney  
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosures

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<sup>1</sup> 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/](http://www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/).