

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

February 28, 2023

**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: Ryan.Walters@sde.ok.gov**

Ryan Walters  
State Superintendent of Public Instruction  
State Department of Education  
2500 N. Lincoln Blvd.  
Oklahoma City, OK 73105

Re: End sham “faith based advisory committee” on school prayer

Dear Superintendent Walters:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation and our Oklahoma membership to object to your misuse of your position and the Department of Education to push Christianity and prayer in Oklahoma’s public schools through a sham committee looking into “religious practices throughout public education.” FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including more than 200 members in Oklahoma. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church and educates about nontheism.

It is our understanding that you recently received a letter from several Oklahoma Christian leaders advising you to use the Department of Education to push prayer and “expressions of faith in God” onto Oklahoma’s students. The letter proclaimed in its header, “GOD IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS Restoring the Foundation of American Education.” It requested that you “take every action possible to allow corporate prayer and expressions of faith in God back in our public schools system.” (We had to look up “corporate prayer.” According to various religious websites,<sup>1</sup> corporate prayer refers to “praying together with other people — in small groups or in larger bodies of people” and is linked to a New Testament verse.)

The ministries’ letter misrepresented the role of religion in our nation’s founding: “The founding of our nation is steeped in guidance from our Creator. Secondary education in the United States was founded on faith in God and virtue. Stripping these fundamental influences has only made education and our state weaker. Our families suffer, our communities become divided, and atheism runs rampant.” It concluded with a request that you form “an advisory group to study the issue of allowing corporate prayer and the acknowledgement of God in our classrooms and make recommendations.” Please see a copy of the letter (attached).

The letter was signed by six Christian leaders, including the president of City Elders, an organization founded on Christian nationalism, and Bob Linn, president of the Oklahoma Conservative Political Action Committee. The City Elders website explains: “We are a national network of elders charged with the mission of governing the gates of every city in America to establish the Kingdom of God with strength, honor, and courage.”<sup>2</sup> The mission of the Oklahoma Conservative Political Action Committee “is to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.allaboutprayer.org/corporate-prayer.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <https://cityelders.com/about/>

promote and support public servants who oppose expansive government while promoting Constitutional liberty, free markets, and a Biblical Worldview.”<sup>3</sup> Dr. Howard Hatcher is president of Ministers Network, an evangelical group “in adherence to the authority of Scripture, the deity of Christ, and Salvation through faith in the atoning work of Christ.”<sup>4</sup> The other signers of the letter appear to be connected with ministries or to be ministers, including Wade Burleson,<sup>5</sup> who runs a ministry whose purpose is “making Christ known.” They all apparently endorse Christian nationalism and the use of government to spread Christianity.

Rather than ignoring this letter advocating for state interference with the private rights of conscience of Oklahoma’s public school students, as any sensible elected official would, you have instead misguidedly joined in the scheme, by announcing the formation of a committee to “advise and recommend guidance to local school systems on how to protect every student and parents’ freedom to worship.”

Superintendent Walters: You took an oath of office to “support, obey, and defend the Constitution of the United States, and the Constitution of the State of Oklahoma,” not to promote “worship” or your personal religious beliefs, or to evangelize. We remind you that the U.S. Constitution is a godless document, whose only references to religion are exclusionary, such as its prohibition of any religious test for public office. The framers of our secular Constitution deliberately and purposefully invested sovereignty not in a deity, but in “We the People.” They adopted a Bill of Rights whose First Amendment separates religion from government. Furthermore, the Oklahoma state Constitution provides for the “establishment and maintenance of a system of public schools, which shall be open to all the children of the state and *free from sectarian control*” [emphasis added].

We urge you to immediately disband this sham committee and any attempts to study or recommend how to impose Christian prayer on public school students. More than 60 years of firm Supreme Court precedent disallows “corporate prayer” being hosted and scheduled by public school officials, and other forms of indoctrination in our public schools. Prayer, bible reading and other religious rituals may not be part of the school day or inflicted upon other students during the school day, whether led by teachers, principals or other students. After-hours religious clubs proliferate in public schools and, as the old saw goes, as long as there are math tests in schools, there probably will be prayer, but at the private level. Forcing religious rituals upon a captive audience of schoolchildren is not only divisive, it is a violation of the right of conscience. Religious instruction of minors is a matter that must be left to parents.

Your announcement comes shortly after Attorney General Gentner Drummond recently corrected a similar religious push by former Attorney General John O’Connor, who issued an egregious opinion advising the Virtual Charter School Board to violate the state constitution’s ban on funding religious schools. Attorney General Gentner Drummond rightly noted that former Attorney General John O’Connor misinterpreted the freedom of religion when forming his opinion: “Religious liberty is one of our most fundamental freedoms . . . It allows us to worship according to our faith, and to be free from any duty that may conflict with our faith. The Opinion as issued by my predecessor misuses the concept of religious liberty by employing it as a means to justify state-funded religion.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://ocpac.us/about>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.iomtc.org/iom-network>

<sup>5</sup> <https://istoriaministries.com/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.oag.ok.gov/articles/drummond-withdraws-opinion-enabling-state-funded-religious-schools>

Furthermore, keeping schools secular and welcoming to students of diverse — and no — religious beliefs makes Oklahoma stronger, not “weaker.” The *least religious countries* of this world:

- Have the lowest rates of violent crime and homicide
- Are the best place to raise children and be a mother
- Have the lowest rates of corruption
- Have the lowest levels of intolerance against racial and ethnic minorities
- Score highest when it comes to women’s rights and gender equality
- Have the greatest protection and enjoyment of political and civil liberties
- Are better at educating their youth in reading, math, and science
- Are the most peaceful and the most prosperous
- Have the highest quality of life.<sup>7</sup>

The pattern of lower religiosity to higher societal well-being also exists within the United States. Those states that are the most religious also have a high occurrence of societal ills.<sup>8</sup> States that tend to be among the *most religious* in the nation have the highest rates of violent crime and murder.<sup>9</sup>

These studies do not prove that religion causes *all* of society’s ills, but do reveal that religion and prayer forced into our public schools are not a panacea and are actually counterproductive. As Thomas Paine said, “Accustom a people to believe that priests or any other class of men can forgive sins, and you will have sins in abundance.”<sup>10</sup>

State education exists to cultivate the minds of young students and promote independent thinking, in short to educate, not indoctrinate. The State Department of Education is a public entity and must respect the rights of conscience of Oklahoma’s students. Studying the best ways to impose prayer and religious exercise on students particularly stigmatizes and alienates non-religious students. About a third of U.S. teens (32 percent) say they are religiously unaffiliated, including 6 percent who describe themselves as atheists, 4 percent who are agnostics and 23 percent who say their religion is “nothing in particular.”<sup>11</sup> Non-religious Americans are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification — 35 percent of Americans are non-Christians, and this includes the more than three-in-ten adult Americans (29 percent) who now identify as religiously unaffiliated.<sup>12</sup> Fully 48 percent of Gen Z identify as “nones” (atheists, agnostics or “nothing in particular:”) and at least 17 percent explicitly identify as atheist or agnostic.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In a synthesis of the latest social scientific research concerning some of these issues *see* Zuckerman, Phil. 2009. ‘Atheism, Secularity, and Well-Being: How the Findings of Social Science Counter Negative Stereotypes and Assumptions.’ *Sociology Compass*, Vol. 3 Issue 6, 949-971.

<sup>8</sup> States that tend to be among the *most religious* in the nation have the highest rates of poverty, obesity, infant mortality, STDs, teen pregnancy, as well as, the lowest percentage of college educated adults. Zuckerman at 955, 961 (internal citations omitted).

<sup>9</sup> Zuckerman at 955, 961 (internal citations omitted)

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Paine, A Letter to Camille Jordan (1797), in *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, (GP Putnam’s Sons, 1896) IV:252. Available at <https://books.google.com/books?id=srpGH65Zl9kC&pg=PA252>

<sup>11</sup> *Religious affiliation among American adolescents* Pew Research Center (Sep. 10, 2020), available at [www.pewresearch.org/religion/2020/09/10/religious-affiliation-among-american-adolescents/](http://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2020/09/10/religious-affiliation-among-american-adolescents/).

<sup>12</sup> *About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults are Now Religiously Unaffiliated* Pew Research Center (Dec. 14, 2021), available at [www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/](http://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/).

<sup>13</sup> “Gen Z and Religion in 2021,” by Prof. Ryan P. Burge, Eastern Illinois University: <https://religioninpublic.blog/2022/06/15/gen-z-and-religion-in-2021/>

As the superintendent of Oklahoma's public schools, you should be working on educating, rather than indoctrinating, the more than 650,000 students in Oklahoma. These students are the future of this country, which was founded on the basis of freedom *of*, and necessarily freedom *from*, religion in government and in our public schools.

Very truly,

Handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Annie Laurie Gaylor Dan Barker". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker  
Co-presidents  
ALG/DB:cal

Enclosure

**GOD IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS**  
*Restoring the Foundations of American Education*

February 14, 2023

To Superintendent Ryan Walters,

We are requesting that you take every action possible to allow corporate prayer and expressions of faith in God back in our public school system. Each of us knows the struggle and turmoil in our communities and the power that prayer and moral character have on kids and young adults.

The founding of our nation is steeped in guidance from our Creator. Secondary education in the United States was founded on faith in God and virtue. Stripping these fundamental influences has only made education and our state weaker. Our families suffer, our communities become divided, and atheism runs rampant.

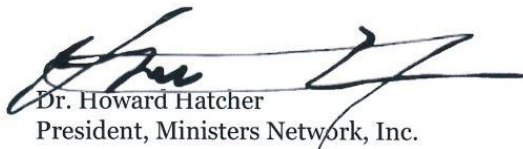
Under your leadership, there can be a positive impact on our families and in our classrooms. We request that you form an advisory group to study the issue of allowing corporate prayer and the acknowledgment of God in our classrooms and make recommendations.

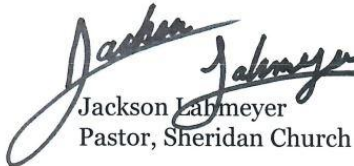
Sincerely,

  
Wade Burtson  
President, Istoria

  
Bob Linn  
President, OCPAC Foundation

  
Jesse Leon Rodgers  
President, City Elders

  
Dr. Howard Hatcher  
President, Ministers Network, Inc.

  
Jackson Lahmeyer  
Pastor, Sheridan Church

  
Mike Biggs  
Pastor, Christ the King Presbyterian (PCA)