

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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December 2, 2019

**SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL: [jwindle@tallapoosak12.org](mailto:jwindle@tallapoosak12.org)**

Joseph C. Windle  
Superintendent  
Tallapoosa County Schools  
679 E. Columbus Street  
Dadeville, AL 36853

Re: Football Baptism Event

Dear Superintendent Windle:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional concern recently reported in Tallapoosa County Schools (TCS). FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with 30,000 members across the country, including members in Alabama. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

It is our understanding that on November 21, 2019, the Reeltown High School football team participated in a team baptism event held on school property with school staff members, including the head football coach, present. Please see the enclosed photos.

We write to ensure that TCS is not sponsoring and endorsing religious activities.

It is well settled that public schools may not advance or promote religion. Courts have consistently held that it is illegal for a public school to organize, sponsor, or lead religious activity at public high school athletic events, such as football practice. *See Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2001); *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). In *Lee v. Weisman*, the Supreme Court extended the prohibition of school sponsored religious activities beyond the classroom to all school functions, holding prayers at public high school graduations an impermissible establishment of religion. As school-sponsored activities, football team events cannot include any endorsement of religion or religious rituals.

Given that this religious ritual took place on school property with school staff members present, reasonable TCS students will perceive it was endorsed by the school. Allowing outside adults to perform religious rituals specific to one religion, in this case Christianity, at a team event, ostracizes those students and families who identify as nonreligious or practice a minority religion. Today, 30 percent of the country is non-

Christian, with 24 percent having no religious affiliation whatsoever; among millennials, the “unaffiliated” figure jumps to 38 percent.<sup>1</sup> There is little doubt that non-Christian and nonreligious children are among the students at TCS, and their freedom of conscience must be respected.

We ask that the District investigate this situation and ensure that it is respecting the rights of conscience of its students and their families. The District should take the appropriate steps to ensure there will be no further religious rituals, including baptisms, during school-sponsored activities. Please reply detailing the steps being taken to ensure that TCS is in compliance with the First Amendment. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Christopher Line  
Staff Attorney  
*Freedom From Religion Foundation*

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<sup>1</sup> Robert P. Jones and Daniel Cox, *America's Changing Religious Identity*. Public Religion Research Institute, 2017. <https://www.prrri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf>

