

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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July 12, 2023

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: koneill@vicksburgschools.org

Keevin O'Neill
Superintendent
Vicksburg Community Schools
301 S Kalamazoo Ave
Vicksburg, MI 49097

Re: Unconstitutional prayer at school-sponsored event

Dear Superintendent O'Neill:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation that occurred in the Vicksburg Community Schools (the District). FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 40,000 members across the country, including more than 1,000 members in Michigan. 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 parent reported that the May 2023 Vicksburg High School senior awards banquet, held at the high school, included two Christian prayers—one before the ceremony and one before dinner. We are told that the prayers were led by a District employee, Lisa Coe. It is our understanding that the opening prayer was listed on the banquet's program, but that the pre-dinner prayer was not listed. Reportedly, both prayers explicitly mentioned Jesus Christ and were overtly Christian. Our complainants further state that two Jewish parents at the banquet commented on the exclusively Christian nature of the prayers, and said something to the effect of "did they have to mention Jesus? We're Jewish." Further, our complainant explained that they and their family are nonreligious, and they do not feel it is appropriate for their family to have to participate in prayer as part of a school-sponsored event.

We write to request that the District investigate this situation and ensure that no future school-sponsored events include prayer.

Students have the First Amendment right to be free from religious indoctrination in their public schools, including when participating in school-sponsored events. It is a basic constitutional principle that public schools may not show favoritism towards or coerce belief or participation in religion. *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2000); *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). The Supreme Court has specifically struck down prayers given at public school events. *Santa Fe* at 320 (striking down a school policy that authorized students to vote on whether to have a prayer at high school football games). In *Santa Fe*, the Court reasoned that because the football game was a school-sponsored event, hosting prayer was a constitutional violation. *Id.* at 307. Moreover, government-sponsored prayer "has the improper effect of coercing those present to participate in an act of religious worship." *Id.* at 312.

Like the prayer practice in *Santa Fe*, the prayers delivered at the school-sponsored senior awards banquet were inappropriate and unconstitutional. Including explicitly Christian prayers as part of a school-sponsored awards banquet held on school property clearly crosses the line. Vicksburg High School, and thus the District, displayed clear favoritism towards religion over nonreligion, and Christianity above all other faiths. Further, students and their families were coerced to observe two Christian prayers in order to participate in a banquet meant to honor students' achievements, not promote religion.

Furthermore, imposing prayer on students, parents, and community members violates their religious rights. The District serves a diverse population with diverse religious beliefs, including Jews, Muslims, atheists, and agnostics. Thirty-seven percent of the American population is non-Christian, including the almost 30 percent¹ who are nonreligious. At least a third of Generation Z (those born after 1996) have no religion², with a recent survey revealing almost half of Gen Z qualify as "nones" (religiously unaffiliated).³ The District must be neutral with regard to religion in order to respect and protect the First Amendment rights of all students and their families.

The District must investigate this matter and ensure that no future school-sponsored events include prayer. Please inform us in writing of the steps the District is taking to address this constitutional violation so that we may inform our complainant. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Samantha F. Lawrence". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial 'S'.

Samantha F. Lawrence
Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation

¹ 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/.

² Samuel J. Abrams, *Perspective: Why even secular people should worry about Gen Z's lack of faith*, Deseret News (Mar. 4, 2023), www.deseret.com/2023/3/4/23617175/gen-z-faith-religious-nones-civic-life-volunteers-charity

³ 2022 Cooperative Election Study of 60,000 respondents, analyzed by Ryan P. Burge www.religioninpublic.blog/2023/04/03/gen-z-and-religion-in-2022/.