

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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May 26, 2011

SENT VIA FAX & U.S. MAIL
(931) 363-8975

Tee Jackson
Director of Schools
Giles County Board of Education
270 Richland Drive
Pulaski, TN 38478

Re: Prayer at Kindergarten Graduation

Dear Mr. Jackson:

Our national organization, which works to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, contacted you earlier this academic year regarding illegal prayer in kindergarten classrooms. We write again after being contacted by parents with children in Giles County public schools about illegal and inappropriate prayer at Pulaski Elementary School events.

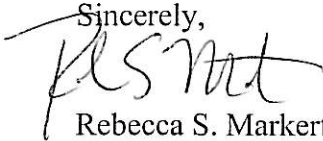
It is our information and understanding that on May 20, 2011, Pulaski Elementary School held a graduation ceremony for its kindergarten students. Our complainants inform us that at the beginning of the ceremony Principal Holt introduced a clergy member from a local Church of Christ. This clergy member gave a prayer that lasted about two minutes and ended "in the name of Jesus Christ." Our complainants inform us that prayer at kindergarten graduation seems to be a tradition at kindergarten graduation as Principal Holt referenced the prayer from last year's ceremony. That prayer was given by a clergy member from a Methodist Church. Finally, we understand that you, as Director of the Schools, were present at this ceremony and heard the prayer.

Given our previous correspondence about prayer in the kindergarten classroom, it is extremely troubling why you would allow a prayer at a school-sponsored event such as graduation. As you certainly must know, the Supreme Court has continually struck down prayers at school-sponsored events, including public school graduations. *See Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992)(declaring unconstitutional clergy-delivered prayers at a public school graduation); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2000)(holding that student-delivered prayers at high school football games violate the Establishment Clause). School officials may not invite a student, teacher, faculty member, or clergy to give any type of prayer, invocation, or benediction at a public high school graduation. The Supreme Court has settled this matter— public school graduations must be secular to protect the freedom of conscience of all students.

The fact that this prayer was delivered at a *kindergarten* graduation is even more egregious. The graduating kindergarten children, as young as five, who have previously been taught prayer by their teachers and are again subjected to religious ritual on their big graduation day cannot possibly be able to discern that the school district does not endorse the religious messages embodied in the graduation prayers. *See Bell v. Little Axe Ind. Sch. Dist. No. 70*, 766 F. 2d 1391 (10th Cir. 1985) (“Elementary schoolchildren are vastly more impressionable than high school or university students and cannot be expected to discern nuances which indicate whether there is true neutrality toward religion on the part of a school administration.”)

Finally, we are concerned that this prayer tradition is not limited to Pulaski Elementary School kindergarten graduations, but rather all Giles County public school graduations begin with prayer. Therefore, we request you immediately take steps to halt these unconstitutional practices at future graduations – be it kindergarten, 8th grade or high school. Promptly inform us in writing of the steps you are taking to remedy these violations. Our local district complainants await action.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'RS Markert', written over the word 'Sincerely,'.

Rebecca S. Markert
Staff Attorney

CC: Bill Holt, Principal Pulaski Elementary