

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

August 10, 2011

**SENT VIA FAX & U.S. MAIL
(228) 938-6528**

Wayne Rodolfich
Superintendent
Pascagoula School District
1006 Communy Ave
Pascagoula MS 39568-0250

Re: Prayer Gathering at Pascagoula High School

Dear Mr. Rodolfich:

I am writing on behalf of a concerned resident and taxpayer and other Mississippi members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to alert you to a serious concern regarding separation of state and church which occurred at Pascagoula High School. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 16,600 members across the country including members in Mississippi. Our purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

It is our information and understanding that on July 31st, a public prayer session was held at Pascagoula High School at the request of Principal Al Sparkman. It is our information that faculty members, parents, students and pastors gathered at the school to pray for the success of the upcoming school year. A faculty member proclaimed, "They say you can take prayer out of schools but you can't take it out of our hearts Lord." *See* <http://www.wlox.com/story/15182812/pascagoula-school-district-prays-for-a-successful-year>

It is well settled that public schools may not advance or promote religion, including religious exercise such as prayer. *See generally, 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 Twshp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962). No public school employee may urge religious points of view on students, parents or any "supporters" of the school district including stressing the importance of prayer.

Promoting and encouraging prayer violates the First Amendment because it imposes religious sentiments and practices upon students and their parents within the school district. This event clearly demonstrates that the school prefers religion over non-religion. This District endorsement of prayer also offends the fifteen percent of the U.S. population that is non-religious or non-believers who do not believe in prayer. This “[s]chool sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible because it sends the ancillary message to members of the audience who are nonadherents ‘that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community and accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.’” *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309-10 (2001)(quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. at 668)(O’Connor, J., concurring). The District’s promotion of religion over non-religion impermissibly turns any non-believing Pascagoula School District student, parent, teacher, or staff member into an outsider.

The District must immediately end Principal Sparkman’s practice of encouraging organizing prayer events at Pascagoula High School. We request an immediate investigation into this situation and appropriate steps be taken to prevent future prayer events organized by school officials. Please inform us in writing of the actions you are taking on this matter. We look forward to a reply at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,



Stephanie A. Schmitt
Staff Attorney

cc: Al Sparkman, Principal, Pascagoula High School