

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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May 2, 2024

**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: Teresa.Jacobs@ocps.net, Angie.Gallo@ocps.net, Maria.Salamanca@ocps.net, Alicia.Farrant@ocps.net, Pamela.Gould@ocps.net, Vicki.Felder@ocps.net, Karen.CastorDentel@ocps.net, Melissa.Byrd@ocps.net**

Teresa Jacobs  
Chair  
Orange County School Board  
445 W. Amelia St.  
Orlando, FL 32801

Re: Unconstitutional Promotion of National Day of Prayer

Dear Chair Jacobs and School Board members:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation occurring in Orange County Public Schools. As you will recall, FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including more than 2,000 members and a local chapter in Florida, the Central Florida Freethought Community. 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 local resident has reported that Orange County Public Schools is officially supporting and promoting the National Day of Prayer. The Board released an official proclamation signed by Chair Jacobs and Superintendent Vazquez “proclaim[ing] May 2, 2024 as National Day of Prayer in Orange County Public Schools.” The proclamation attempts to disguise this overtly Christian event by characterizing it as for “people of all faiths in the United States.” Please see a copy of the proclamation attached. This Christian event is also being promoted on the District’s official social media pages. Please see the enclosed screenshots.

We write to request that Orange County Public Schools refrain from supporting and promoting the National Day of Prayer in the future in order to respect the right of conscience of all District students and their families.

Contrary to the assertion made in your proclamation, the National Day of Prayer is a sectarian event. It originated with the Reverend Billy Graham during his evangelical crusade in Washington, D.C. in 1952. He expressed an openly Christian purpose, seeking an annual prayer proclamation by the President because he wanted “the Lord Jesus Christ” to be recognized across the land. Subsequently, the National Day of Prayer Task Force was created to “communicate with every individual the need for personal repentance and prayer, mobilizing the Christian community to intercede for America and its leadership.” The task force issues annual National

Day of Prayer proclamations and submits them to the President, choosing a theme with supporting scripture from the bible. This year's theme is "Lift up the word - light up the world" based upon the Old Testament verse 2 Samuel 22:29-31: "For you are my lamp, O Lord, and my God lightens my darkness. For by You I can run against a troop, and by my God I can leap over a wall. This God—his way is perfect; the word of the Lord proves true; He is a shield for all those who take refuge in Him.." <sup>1</sup>

The 2024 National Prayer for America is also explicitly Christian. It begins, "Jesus, we profess our faith in You. You are the Light of the world, and in You there is no darkness," and ends "In the Mighty name of Jesus we pray, amen!" <sup>2</sup> The prayer specifically invokes the Seven Mountains Mandate, which requires that Christian nationalists or Christians should lead government, family, religion, business, education, media, arts and entertainment, "Lead us forward to dispel the darkness and bring light throughout the Church, Family, Education, Business, Military, Government, and Arts, Entertainment, and Media." The task force has a Statement of Faith that is exclusive to Christians, including that "The Holy Bible is the inspired, only, infallible, authoritative Word of The Living God" and a belief in "the spiritual unity of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ." <sup>3</sup>

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).

Moreover, "the preservation and transmission of religious beliefs and worship is a responsibility and a choice committed to the private sphere." *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 310 (2000) (quoting *Lee*, 505 U.S. at 589). By instituting an official, district-sponsored Christian day of prayer, the Board needlessly alienates community members who are non-Christians, including those among the nearly thirty percent of adult Americans who are religiously unaffiliated, as well as the additional six percent of Americans adhering to non-Christian faiths. <sup>4</sup> Even if this event were actually for "people of all faiths," that would still exclude the forty-nine percent of Generation Z who are religiously unaffiliated. <sup>5</sup> Promoting a Christian nationalist prayer event and encouraging students to take part in prayer usurps the authority of parents who have the right to decide whether to raise their children in any given faith or no faith at all. The Board and District have not only violated the Establishment Clause, but they have abused the trust that our complainant and all students' parents placed in their public school district.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nationaldayofprayer.org/events/theme>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nationaldayofprayer.org/equipping/2024-national-prayer>

<sup>3</sup> *Statement of Faith*, NATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER TASK FORCE, [www.nationaldayofprayer.org/statement\\_of\\_faith](http://www.nationaldayofprayer.org/statement_of_faith).

<sup>4</sup> Gregory A. Smith, *Religious 'Nones' in America: Who They Are and What They Believe*, Pew Research Center, Jan. 24, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ryan P. Burge, *2022 Cooperative Election Study of 60,000 respondents*, Apr. 3, 2023, <https://religioninpublic.blog/2023/04/03/gen-z-and-religion-in-2022/>.

School board members may pray privately or worship on their own time in their own way. They cannot, however, use their positions to affiliate the District with Christianity and to coerce students into engaging in prayer or participating in religious events.

Orange County Public Schools has a constitutional obligation to religious neutrality. Supporting the National Day of Prayer is inappropriate and unnecessary. Promotion of prayer by school board members raises the distasteful appearance of political pandering to appeal to or appease a vocal Christian evangelical constituency. We ask that the District end its official support for this divisive event and that the Board cease using its power to attempt to coerce students into engaging in prayer in order to respect the constitutional rights of all District students. Please respond promptly in writing with the steps the District is taking to ensure this violation does not recur.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Chris Line", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Christopher Line  
Staff Attorney  
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosures

Cc: Superintendent Maria F. Vazquez via [supt@ocps.net](mailto:supt@ocps.net)



ORANGE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

# Proclamation

**NATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER  
MAY 2, 2024**

**WHEREAS**, the National Day of Prayer is an annual day of observance held on the first Thursday in May and designated by the United States Congress; and

**WHEREAS**, the National Day of Prayer, which falls on Thursday, May 2, 2024, requests people of all faiths in the United States to pray for the nation and its leaders; and

**WHEREAS**, on April 17, 1952, in a joint resolution of Congress, President Harry Truman signed a bill proclaiming the National Day of Prayer into law in the United States; and

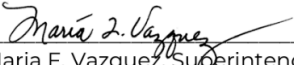
**WHEREAS**, according to the Legal Information Institute at Cornell Law School, the President shall issue a proclamation each year designating the first Thursday in May as a National Day of Prayer on which the people of the United States may engage in prayer and meditation at houses of worship, in groups and as individuals; and

**WHEREAS**, the National Prayer Committee was established in the United States in 1972, and later became the National Day of Prayer Task Force, with the intended purpose of coordinating events for the National Day of Prayer; and

**WHEREAS**, President Ronald W. Reagan approved an amendment in 1988, designating the first Thursday of May each year as the National Day of Prayer;

**NOW, THEREFORE**, the School Board of Orange County, Florida does hereby proclaim May 2, 2024 as National Day of Prayer in Orange County Public Schools.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Teresa Jacobs, Chair  
School Board of Orange County

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Maria F. Vazquez, Superintendent  
Orange County Public Schools



Orange County Public Schools

6 hours ago · 🌐



The School Board of Orange County proclaims May 2, 2024 as National Day of Prayer in OCPS.

The National Day of Prayer is an annual day of observance held on the first Thursday in May and designated by the United States Congress.

[#ocps](#) [#NationalDayofPrayer](#)

# NATIONAL DAY *of* PRAYER

MAY 2



# NATIONAL DAY of PRAYER

MAY 2

 Orange County Public Schools



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**ocps\_official** The School Board of Orange County proclaims May 2, 2024 as National Day of Prayer in OCPS.

The National Day of Prayer is an annual day of observance held on the first Thursday in May and designated by the United States Congress.

#ocps #NationalDayofPrayer

6h



**softballgiddens** Amen we sure need this



1h Reply



**jennyoperagirl** Praise God!



367 likes

6 hours ago



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