

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: [lventura@mauryk12.org](mailto:lventura@mauryk12.org)**

Lisa Ventura  
Superintendent  
Maury County Public Schools  
501 West 8th Street  
Columbia, TN 38401

Re: Unconstitutional prayer at graduation ceremony

Dear Superintendent Ventura:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation that occurred in Maury County Public Schools (“MCPS”). FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including over 500 members and a local chapter in Tennessee. 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 MCPS parent reported that the Battle Creek Middle School promotion and awards ceremony included prayer and proselytizing remarks. It is our understanding that the Battle Creek promotion and awards ceremony for graduating 8th grade students took place during the school day in the school’s gymnasium. We are told that at the end of the ceremony Principal [REDACTED] read several bible verses as part of his closing remarks and stated that he regularly reads the bible to students and recommends that students read the bible as a good guide for their lives. Our complainant further reports that Principal [REDACTED] then closed the ceremony with an explicitly Christian prayer. We are informed that before giving the prayer Principal [REDACTED] stated that he was honored to be the principal, but that he was still going to pray, which our complainant took to mean that Principal [REDACTED] was aware that it is unconstitutional for a public school district’s principal to deliver prayers at a school-sponsored event.

As a nonreligious family, our complainant and their children did not participate in the closing prayer nor stand to applaud when Principal [REDACTED] ended the prayer. Our complainant explained that the religious remarks and prayer made them and their children upset and uncomfortable; not only because the prayer and proselytizing remarks were unconstitutional, but also because their family felt singled out and excluded at a school-sponsored event that should have been welcoming and inclusive.

We write to request that MCPS investigate this matter and ensure that no future school-sponsored events include prayer.

Public school students have a constitutional right to be free from religious indoctrination in their public schools. 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). School officials, including principals, may not invite a student, teacher, faculty member, or clergy to give any type of prayer, invocation, or benediction

at a public school graduation nor may they deliver one themselves *See Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2000) (holding that a school’s policy allowing student-delivered prayers at high school football games violates the Establishment Clause). It is well-settled that public schools may not include prayer in graduation ceremonies.

It makes no difference how many students want prayer or wouldn’t be offended by prayer at their graduation ceremony; the courts have continually reaffirmed that the rights of minorities are nonetheless protected by the Constitution. As the Supreme Court has said, “fundamental rights may not be submitted to vote; they depend on the outcome of no elections.” *Id.* at 304–05 (quoting *W. Va. Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624, 638 (1943)). “The very purpose of a Bill of Rights was to withdraw certain subjects from the vicissitudes of political controversy, to place them beyond the reach of majorities and officials and to establish them as legal principles to be applied by the courts.” *Barnette*, 319 U.S. at 638. MCPS has a constitutional duty to remain neutral toward religion. By making proselytizing remarks and delivering a Christian prayer at the 8th grade promotion and awards ceremony, Principal [REDACTED] and thus MCPS, abridged that duty and needlessly alienated students and families like our complainant who are a part of the 49 percent of Generation Z who are religiously unaffiliated.<sup>1</sup>

MCPS must ensure that all future school-sponsored events do not include prayer in order to respect the First Amendment rights of students and their families. Please respond in writing with the steps MCPS is taking to address this constitutional violation so that we may inform our complainant.

Sincerely,



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

<sup>1</sup> 2022 Cooperative Election Study of 60,000 respondents, analyzed by Ryan P. Burge  
<https://religioninpublic.blog/2023/04/03/gen-z-and-religion-in-2022/>