

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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September 4, 2025

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: yeagleybrett@lakelocal.org

Brett Yeagley
Superintendent
Lake Local Schools
436 King Church Ave. SW
Uniontown, OH 44685

Re: Unconstitutional religious coercion in athletics programs

Dear Superintendent Yeagley:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a serious constitutional violation in a Lake Local Schools athletics program. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 42,000 members across the country, including more than 1,100 members and two local chapters in Ohio. 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 [REDACTED] a cross country coach at Lake Middle High School, has been leading her team in prayer before meets. We understand that Coach [REDACTED] told the team, “let’s continue to pray before every meet like last year.” We are further informed that coach-led prayer is common across sports teams in the District.

Our concerned parent reported that they and their child felt helpless, awkward, and embarrassed that the child was forced to either pray against their own beliefs or risk ostracizing themselves from the team by stepping away from the illegal prayer.

We ask that the District investigate this situation and take immediate action to ensure that Coach [REDACTED] and all other coaches in the District cease abusing their positions by proselytizing and pressuring student athletes to engage in prayer. Coaches are free to express their religious beliefs however they wish outside of their roles as public school coaches, but they cannot use their position to foist their personal religious beliefs onto students or encourage students to pray.

Student athletes have the First Amendment right to be free from religious indoctrination when participating in their public school’s athletics program. The Supreme Court has continually struck down school-sponsored prayer in public schools. *See, e.g., Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 308 (2000) (holding student-led prayer over the loudspeaker before football games unconstitutional.”); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992) (finding prayers at public high school graduations an impermissible establishment of religion); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38 (1985) (overturning law requiring daily “period of silence not to exceed one minute . . . for meditation or daily prayer”); *Sch. Dist. of Abington Twp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963) (holding school-sponsored devotional Bible reading and recitation of the Lord’s Prayer unconstitutional); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962) (declaring school-sponsored prayers in public schools unconstitutional). Here, Coach [REDACTED] has clearly crossed the constitutional line by pressuring student athletes into engaging prayer while acting in her official capacity as a District employee.

Student athletes are especially susceptible to coercion. Students know that their coaches control their positions on the team, including who runs each race. When a coach directs students to participate in a prayer, the student athletes will no doubt feel that participating in that prayer is essential to pleasing their coach and being viewed as a team player. It is unrealistic and unconstitutional to put student athletes to the choice of allowing their constitutional rights to be violated in order to maintain good standing in the eyes of their coach and peers or openly dissenting at the risk of retaliation from their coach and teammates.

The Supreme Court's 2022 decision in *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* did not alter the state of the law nor overturn the above referenced cases. In *Kennedy*, the Court held that a high school football coach's silent, private post-game prayer was constitutional. 597 U.S. 507, 512–14 (2022). Throughout its opinion, the Court repeatedly stressed that the coach silently prayed alone. *Id.* (the coach “offered his prayers quietly while his students were otherwise occupied.”). The prayers “were not publicly broadcast or recited to a captive audience. Students were not required or expected to participate.” *Id.* at 542. In stark contrast, Coach [REDACTED] is requiring her team to take part in prayer at each meet.

“The preservation and transmission of religious beliefs and worship is a responsibility and a choice **committed to the private sphere.**” *Santa Fe*, 530 U.S. 290 at 310 (quoting *Lee*, 505 U.S. 577 at 589 (emphasis added)). The coach's actions are particularly troubling for those parents and students who are not Christians or do not subscribe to any religion. This “[s]chool sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible because it sends the ancillary message to . . . nonadherents ‘that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.’” *Id.* at 309–10 (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O'Connor, J., concurring)). Nearly half of Gen Z (those born after 1996) are nonreligious, so this likely represents a significant number of students in the District.¹

In order to protect students' First Amendment rights, we ask that the District investigate this matter and take immediate action. District coaches, including Coach [REDACTED], must cease directing or encouraging students to participate in prayer or any other religious activities as part of the athletics program. We further request that the District remind all coaches that they may not push their personal religious beliefs onto students while acting in their official capacity as school employees. Please inform us in writing of the steps the District is taking to remedy these serious violations of the First Amendment so that we may inform the parent who contacted us. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Kyle J. Steinberg
Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation

¹ 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/.