

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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May 4, 2026

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: roland.popejoy@valleyviewschools.net

Superintendent Roland Popejoy
Valley View Public Schools
2131 Valley View Dr.
Jonesboro, AR 72404

Re: Unconstitutional coach-led prayers

Dear Superintendent Popejoy:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation regarding a constitutional violation reported in Valley View Public Schools (“the District”). FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 41,000 members across the country, including members and a chapter in Arkansas. 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 reports that the archery coach at Valley View Intermediate School has a pattern and practice of leading students in Christian prayer before tournaments, a recent awards ceremony, and other official archery events. Audio provided to FFRF from the recent awards ceremony confirms that the coach and what appears to be a coach-selected student led the entire audience, including other students, in an explicitly Christian prayer.

The parent who contacted us further explains that they are not religious and that they are “more than disappointed” that their child has “been exposed to such blatant proselytizing.”

The District must immediately investigate this situation and ensure that the Valley View Intermediate School archery coach ceases pushing religion onto students in violation of the First Amendment.

Students 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, 40 n.2 (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, the archery coach is undeniably pushing her personal religious beliefs onto students by coercing the entire archery team to participate in prayers as part

of official school-sponsored activities. The coach is blatantly crossing the constitutional line and violating student-athletes' First Amendment rights.

Student-athletes are especially susceptible to coercion, and the relationship between student athletes and their coaches is inherently ripe for coercion. Students know that their coaches control their positions on the team, including who plays in each game. When coaches lead students in prayer or direct students to lead their teammates in prayer, students will no doubt feel that participating in the prayers is essential to avoiding punishment, pleasing their coach, and being viewed as a team player. They are unlikely to speak up against their coach pushing religion on them even if they do not feel comfortable. It is unrealistic and unconstitutional to put students to the choice of allowing their school coach to violate their constitutional rights or openly dissenting at the risk of punishment and further retaliation.

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 assistant football coach's quiet, private post-game prayer was constitutional. 597 U.S. 507, 512–14 (2022). Throughout its opinion, the Court repeatedly stressed that the coach quietly 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 contrast, the archery coach is repeatedly leading students in prayer while acting in her official capacity.

"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. at 310 (quoting *Lee*, 505 U.S. at 589). Parents, not coaches, have the constitutional right to guide their children's religious or nonreligious upbringing. In this case, Valley View Intermediate School's archery coach is violating parents' constitutional rights by leading students in prayer and directing students to prayer.

School-sponsored prayer also needlessly marginalizes students, such as our complainant's child, who are nonreligious or members of minority faiths. Statistically, nearly half of Americans born after 1996 are nonreligious.¹

If the coach now claims that participation in prayers is voluntary, voluntariness would still not be a defense. Courts have summarily rejected arguments that voluntariness excuses a constitutional violation. *See Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577, 596 (1992) ("It is a tenet of the First Amendment that the State cannot require one of its citizens to forfeit his or her rights and benefits as the price of resisting conformance to state-sponsored religious practice."); *Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203, 288 (1963) (Brennan, J., concurring) ("... the availability of excusal or exemption simply has no relevance to the establishment question"); *Mellen v. Bunting*, 327 F.3d 355, 372 (4th Cir. 2003) ("VMI cannot avoid Establishment Clause problems by simply asserting that a cadet's attendance at supper or his or her participation in the supper prayer are 'voluntary.'). While students may pray on their own, any student-led prayers must be genuinely and completely student-led and student-initiated, with no input whatsoever from school staff.

¹ Pew Research Center (2024), <http://bit.ly/48Drzce>.

In order to protect students' First Amendment rights, Valley View Public Schools must immediately investigate and ensure that the Valley View Intermediate School archery coach ceases leading students in prayer or assigning students to lead other students in prayer. Please respond in writing with the steps the District is taking to address this constitutional violation so that we may inform the parent who contacted us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Samantha F. Lawrence". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'S' and 'L'.

Samantha F. Lawrence
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation