

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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May 28, 2026

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: george.underwood@walton.k12.ga.us

Superintendent Chip Underwood
Walton County School District
200 Double Springs Church Rd.
Monroe, GA 30656

Re: Official school-sponsored prayer box

Dear Superintendent Underwood:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation occurring in the Walton County School District. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 41,000 members across the country, including more than 600 members in Georgia. 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 community member reports that Youth Middle School is sponsoring an on-campus prayer box on behalf of First Baptist Church. According to our complainant, the prayer box is located in the school's media center. A sign taped to the front of the box reads: "Prayer Request - How can we pray for you? Fill out a prayer request form and place in this box." Please see the enclosed photo of the prayer box.

We ask that the District immediately investigate and remove this school-sponsored prayer box.

Public schools may not show favoritism toward or coerce belief or participation in religion. *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2000) (ruling that student-led prayer at a public high school's football games violated the First Amendment); *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); *McCullum v. Bd. of Ed.*, 333 U.S. 203 (1948). "It is beyond dispute that, at a minimum, the Constitution guarantees that government may not coerce anyone to support or participate in religion or its exercise." *Lee*, at 587. Youth Middle School may not encourage students, staff, or anyone else to pray or request prayer by sponsoring a church prayer box on school property.

It doesn't matter whether students or staff support the school-sponsored prayer box or wouldn't be offended by a school-sponsored prayer box. As the Supreme Court has said, "fundamental rights may not be submitted to vote; they depend on the outcome of no elections." *Santa Fe*, 530 U.S. 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. The District has a constitutional duty to remain neutral toward religion. By giving a church access to the school to promote prayer to students, Youth Middle School, and thus the District, abridges that duty and needlessly marginalizes those students and community members who are among the thirty-eight percent of Americans who are non-Christian,¹ including the 43 percent of Generation Z who are nonreligious.²

In order to comply with the First Amendment, Walton County School District must remove the prayer box from Youth Middle School’s media center and refrain from sponsoring similar religious activities going forward. Please respond in writing with the steps the District is taking to address this matter so that we may inform the community member who contacted us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Samantha F. Lawrence". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Samantha F. Lawrence
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure

¹ Pew Research Center (2024), <http://bit.ly/3W6Cl3m>.

² Pew Research Center (2024), <http://bit.ly/48Drzce>.



Prayer Request

How can we pray for you?

Fill out a prayer request form and place in this box.

Your Name: _____

Prayer request: _____

If you would like for us to follow up or ask for updates, please provide your email address.

Email address: _____