

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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April 22, 2026

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: ocrosby@suhsd.net

Superintendent Owen Crosby
Shasta Union High School District
2200 Eureka Way, Ste. B
Redding, CA 96001

Re: Unconstitutional coach-mandated religious journal

Dear Superintendent Crosby:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation regarding a constitutional violation reported in the Shasta Union High School District. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 41,000 members across the country, including over 5,000 members and two chapters in California. 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 Enterprise High School basketball coach, Abie Ramirez, forced students to complete daily affirmations and prayers in faith-based journals during the 2026 basketball season. Please see the enclosed photograph of the journals that were given to the entire basketball team, titled “the Empowered Christian Athlete Journal.” The journal features a Latin cross on the cover.

According to our parent-complainant, Coach Ramirez would punish student-athletes by forcing them to run additional laps during practice if they did not complete their Christian journal assignments. Please see the enclosed screenshots from the official basketball team group chat. In numerous text messages, Coach Ramirez reminds students that they must complete the Christian journaling assignments or else face punishment, such as “running double.”

The parent who contacted us further explained that they “are very angered and disappointed . . . that a Christian based journal would be pushed at a public school” and “our child would be disciplined for not participating” in the religious journal activities. They went on to say that they are not a religious family, and that the faith-based journal assignments crossed the constitutional line.

The District must immediately investigate this situation and ensure that Coach Ramirez ceases pushing religion onto students in violation of the First Amendment.

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, 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, Coach Ramirez undeniably pushed his personal religious beliefs onto students by coercing the entire basketball team to complete Christian journal assignments under the direct threat of punishment. Public school coaches cannot constitutionally encourage students to believe or participate in religion, let alone force them to complete explicitly faith-based assignments. Coach Ramirez has blatantly crossed the constitutional line and violated 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 direct students to complete Christian journal assignments or else face punishment at practice, student-athletes will no doubt feel that completing the religious journalling 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, Coach Ramirez repeatedly coerced students to participate in Christian journaling as part of official team activities, and any students who failed to complete the journal assignments faced punishment.

“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, Coach Ramirez violated parents’ constitutional rights by forcing his personal beliefs onto the basketball team.

Religious team assignments also needlessly marginalize students, such as our complainant’s child, who are nonreligious or members of minority faiths. Forty-two percent of adult Californians are non-Christians, and 33 percent are nonreligious.¹ Statistically, nearly half of Americans born after 1996 are nonreligious.²

¹ Pew Research Center: California, 2023-24, <https://bit.ly/4qN486r>.

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

If Coach Ramirez now claims that “the Empowered Christian Athlete Journal” assignments were voluntary—though the evidence shows the assignments were mandatory—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.’”).

In order to protect students’ First Amendment rights, the Shasta Union High School District must immediately investigate and ensure that Enterprise High School coach Abie Ramirez ceases pushing his personal religion onto student-athletes. We further urge the District to see that Coach Ramirez and all other coaches are trained on their constitutional obligation to respect students’ constitutional rights. 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, reading "Samantha F. Lawrence". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Samantha" being more prominent and the last name "Lawrence" following in a similar style.

Samantha F. Lawrence
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosures





