

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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June 16, 2026

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL & EMAIL: chris.bastian@k12.nd.us

Superintendent Chris Bastian
Lidgerwood Public School
P.O. Box 468
Lidgerwood, ND 58053

Re: Unconstitutional school-sponsored graduation prayers

Dear Superintendent Bastian:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation reported in Lidgerwood Public School ("the District"). FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 41,000 members across the country, including members in North Dakota. 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 student reports that the District has a years-long tradition of beginning its high school graduation ceremonies with a Christian prayer delivered by a reverend. The student who contacted us states that they've personally witnessed this school-sponsored graduation prayer during the past four graduations, though it's their understanding that the District's graduation prayer practice has been going on for longer than four years. A program from the most recent graduation ceremony indicates that an invocation was delivered by Rev. Pat Schubert. Please see the enclosed photograph of the program.

Our student-complainant further explained that they are a member of a minority faith and that seeing a Christian prayer forced on graduating students and other attendees makes them "uncomfortable." They state that the prayer is pushed on students, and that "[n]o one wants to be the only person not standing with their head bowed." The student expressed concern that the District will force them to participate in prayer at their graduation ceremony in the future. The student told us that they'd "like to not have to be uncomfortable for [their] entire ceremony. And frankly, [they] don't think [they'd] want to show up to [their] own graduation because of how uncomfortable" the forced school-sponsored prayer makes them.

We write to request that the District investigate and ensure that future high school graduation ceremonies do not include school-sponsored prayer.

Public schools may not constitutionally show favoritism toward or coerce belief or participation in religion. *See generally Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2000), *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). The Supreme Court has continually struck down prayers at

school-sponsored events, including graduations. *See Lee*, 505 U.S. 577 (declaring clergy-delivered prayers unconstitutional at a public school graduation); *Santa Fe*, 530 U.S. 290.

School officials may not invite a clergy member, student, community member, teacher, administrator, or anyone else to give any type of prayer, invocation, benediction, or sermon at a public high school-sponsored event. *See Santa Fe*, 530 U.S. 290 (holding that even student-delivered prayers pursuant to school policy at high school football games violate the Establishment Clause). “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. Furthermore, government-sponsored prayer “has the improper effect of coercing those present to participate in an act of religious worship.” *Santa Fe*, at 312. The District reportedly has a four-plus year long practice of including school-sponsored clergy-led prayers at its graduation ceremony in direct violation of students’ First Amendment rights. As illustrated by the student who reached out to us, school-sponsored graduation prayers are unconstitutionally coercive.

The courts have continually reaffirmed that the rights of minorities are 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. Public schools have a constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion and to protect the rights of conscience of students. By forcing prayer on graduating students, the school abridges this duty.

The District may be aware of the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* that an assistant high school football coach’s quiet, private post-game prayer was constitutional. 597 U.S. 507, 512–14 (2022). The Court’s decision in *Kennedy* did not overrule the above cited cases nor does it apply to this situation. 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 District has a longstanding pattern and practice of inviting Christian clergy to lead all students and attendees in an overtly Christian prayer at its official graduation ceremony. This is a far cry from Coach Kennedy’s quiet, private prayer.

High school graduation is a once in a lifetime event that students spend over a decade working toward. As our student-complainant explained, the school’s shoehorning prayer into graduation makes them anxious enough about their future graduation that they may not even attend in order to avoid having their constitutional rights violated by their school. Including prayers at graduation puts many students and families in the difficult position of choosing between exiting or foregoing the ceremony or violating their conscience. The First Amendment forbids public schools from coercing students to make this choice. Including prayer at graduation ceremonies and other school-sponsored events needlessly marginalizes students and families who are nonreligious or members of minority faiths, such as our complainant. Thirty-eight percent of the

American population is non-Christian, including the almost 30 percent who are nonreligious.¹ More than half of Generation Z (those born after 1996) is non-Christian, including 43 percent who are nonreligious.²

In order to protect students' First Amendment rights, Lidgerwood Public School must cease including school-sponsored prayers at its graduation ceremonies. Please respond in writing with the steps the District is taking to address this constitutional violation so that we may inform the student 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

Enclosure

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

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

LIDGERWOOD HIGH SCHOOL COMMENCEMENT

Sunday, May 17, 2026

2:00 PM

Processional	"Pomp and Circumstance" Edward Elgar
Invocation	Rev. Pat Schubert
Welcome	XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
Presentation of Salutatorian	Eileen Larson Principal of Lidgerwood High School
Salutatorian	XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
Presentation of Valedictorian	Eileen Larson
Valedictorian	XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
LHS Choir LHS Band	<i>Landslide-Fleetwood Mac Destiny Fanfare-Mekel Rogers</i>
Class of 2026 Slide Show	
Presentation of Class Roll	
Presentation of Diplomas	Eileen Larson