FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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June 30, 2026

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL & EMAIL: keye@gcpsmail.com

Superintendent Elijah Key, Jr.
Gadsden County School District
35 Martin Luther King Jr Blvd.
Quincy, FL 32351

Re: Multiple constitutional violations

Dear Superintendent Key:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding multiple constitutional violations reported in the Gadsden County School District. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 41,000 members across the country, including over 2,000 members and a chapter in Florida, the Central Florida Freethought Community. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

We've received a report that at the May 22, 2026 Gadsden County High School graduation ceremony, Assistant Principal Jonathan Wilson led the audience in prayer at the beginning of the ceremony from a script.[1] According to Principal Pamela Jones, the invocation was included in the printed programs for the ceremony. Assistant Principal Wilson asked the audience to bow their heads before reciting an overtly Christian scripted prayer addressed to "most gracious Heavenly Father."

Additionally, we also received a report that the May 20, 2026 Class Night and Award ceremony included an invocation delivered by a student.[2] A staff member introduced the student who led the audience in prayer with a prewritten prayer, suggesting that the school approved the prayer and specifically assigned the student to give the prayer ahead of time. The student asked the audience to bow their heads before reciting the scripted prayer addressed to "Dear Heavenly Father."

Further, a baccalaureate service was held in the Gadsden County High School gymnasium on May 17, 2026.[3] Principal Jones was in attendance and the students present wore their graduation caps and gowns. In a prior year, the school has advertised the baccalaureate service on its official social media, suggesting that the school is involved in organizing the event. Please see the attached screenshot.

We write to request that the District investigate and ensure that in the future Gadsden County High School refrains from including prayer at graduations, other school-sponsored events, and refrains from hosting and advertising baccalaureate ceremonies.

[1] Gadsden County High School 2026 Graduation Ceremony, at 10:55, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BFhYJZiI3M.
[2] 2026 Gadsden County HS - Class Night & Awards, at 6:15, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQg3u3CuGbE.
[3] 2026 Gadsden County HS - Baccalaureate Service, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4v-rVVFZVyo.

School-sponsored prayers are unconstitutional

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 and awards ceremonies. *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 student, clergymember, 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*, 505 U.S. at 587. Furthermore, government-sponsored prayer "has the improper effect of coercing those present to participate in an act of religious worship." *Santa Fe*, 530 U.S. at 312. 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)).

Gadsden County High School's inclusion of school-sponsored prayer at graduation and the awards night directly violates students' First Amendment rights. The school cannot avoid a constitutional violation by assigning students to give prayers and it certainly cannot have an administrator lead students, families, and staff in prayer . Forcing students to observe, participate in, and reflect upon prayer as part of their graduation ceremony and awards night undeniably violates their constitutional right to be free from religious indoctrination at the hands of their public school.

Even if the District claims that participation in either prayer was voluntary, voluntariness is not a safeguard against violating students' First Amendment rights. Courts have summarily rejected arguments that voluntariness excuses a constitutional violation. *See generally Lee*, 505 U.S. at 596 ("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."); *Schempp*, 374 U.S. at 288 (Brennan, J., concurring) ("Thus, the short, and to me sufficient, answer is that 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.'"); *Jager v. Douglas County Sch. Dist.*, 862 F.2d 825, 832 (11th Cir. 1989) ("[W]hether the complaining individual's presence was voluntary is not relevant to the Establishment Clause analysis . . . The Establishment Clause focuses on the constitutionality of the state action, not on the choices made by the complaining individual.").

High school graduation is a once in a lifetime event that students spend over a decade working toward. *See Lee*, 505 U.S. at 595 ("Everyone knows that in our society and in our culture high school graduation is one of life's most significant occasions."). Including prayer at graduation, as well as special awards ceremonies, puts many students and families in the difficult position of choosing between exiting 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.

Thirty-eight percent of the American population is non-Christian, including the almost 30 percent who are nonreligious.[4] More than half of Generation Z (those born after 1996) is non-Christian, including 43 percent who are nonreligious.[5]

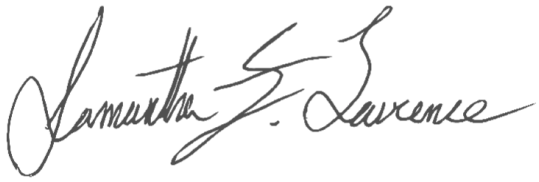
Unconstitutional baccalaureate service

Baccalaureate programs are religious services with prayer and worship. Public schools may not host, promote, plan, organize, or supervise baccalaureate programs. *See, e.g.*, *Warnock v. Archer*, 443 F.3d 954 (8th Cir. 2006) (upholding injunction prohibiting school district from orchestrating or supervising prayers at school graduation or baccalaureate ceremonies). Here, it appears that the District has a pattern and practice of advertising, promoting, and sponsoring baccalaureate programs.

This situation differs from permissible cases where schools allowed private organizations to hold baccalaureates on school property according to neutral guidelines because those schools took significant steps to ensure there was no school sponsorship. *See Randall v. Pegan*, 765 F. Supp. 793, 796 (W.D.N.Y. 1991) (denying injunctive relief where the school had "already formally and publicly dissociated itself from the baccalaureate service, ha[d] canceled its prior order for programs and ha[d] refused to lend any financial support" and no "district personnel [were] involved in any aspect of the service, either in their capacities as District employees or . . . in their personal, individual capacities"); *Verbena Methodist Church v. Chilton Bd. of Educ.*, 765 F. Supp. 704, 714 (M.D. Ala. 1991) ("The Board must also ensure that no other school officials promote, lead, or participate in the service."). In contrast, the District has not taken any steps to disassociate itself from this baccalaureate ceremony. In fact, the District's 2026 ceremony video and past social media posts advertising baccalaureate ceremonies suggests that the District is involved in promoting and organizing the event.

In order to protect students' First Amendment rights, we ask that the Gadsden County School District investigate and ensure that Gadsden County High School ceases hosting and promoting baccalaureate ceremonies and ceases including school-sponsored prayers at its graduation ceremonies and award ceremonies. Please respond in writing with the steps the District is taking to address this matter so that we may inform our complainant. Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,



Samantha F. Lawrence
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

SFL:trm

Enclosure

[4] Pew Research Center (2024), http://bit.ly/3W6Cl3m.
[5] Pew Research Center (2024), http://bit.ly/48Drzce.

Gadsden County High School
May 14, 2022 ·

🔔Friendly Reminder: Class of 2K22 Baccalaureate Service Rehearsal and Senior Fees Payment Reminder... Check out information below for more details. Graduation Updates Coming Soon! #gchsjaguars #GadsdenStrong #JaguarNation #education Gadsden County Public Schools - Florida

