

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 · MADISON, WI 53701 · (608) 256-8900 · WWW.FFRF.ORG

October 14, 2020

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: tcason@gocats.org

Dr. William Cason
Superintendent
Valdosta City Schools
1204 William St.
Valdosta, GA 31601

Re: Unconstitutional Prayer at Athletic Events

Dear Superintendent Cason:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation occurring in Valdosta City Schools. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 33,000 members across the country, including more than 500 members and a local chapter 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 local resident has reported that Valdosta High School begins its football games with scheduled prayer. On October 9, 2020, Valdosta High School began its football game with a prayer delivered by a student over the loudspeaker:

Dear Heavenly Father, we thank You for another opportunity to enjoy some Wildcat football. We thank You for keeping us healthy and faithful throughout this entire period. Tonight, we pray that the... will protect our players, spectators, students and even visitors. We thank You for the effort and strength that will be displayed tonight. Let it produce something powerful and powerful. God, we thank You and we praise You. In Your Son's name we pray, amen.

It is illegal for a public school to sponsor religious messages at school athletic events. The Supreme Court has continually struck down school-sponsored prayer in public schools. *See, e.g., Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992) (ruling prayers at public school graduations an impermissible establishment of religion); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38 (1985) (overturning law requiring daily “period of silence not to exceed one minute . . . for meditation or daily prayer.”); *Abington Twp. Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963) (declaring unconstitutional devotional Bible reading and recitation of the Lord’s Prayer in public schools); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962) (finding prayers in public schools unconstitutional).

Moreover, the Supreme Court has specifically struck down invocations given over the loudspeaker at public school athletic events, even when student-led. *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 320 (2000) (striking down a school policy that authorized students to vote on whether to have a prayer at high school football games). The Court reasoned that because the football game was a school-sponsored event, hosting prayer was a constitutional violation. *Id.* at 307. Even if student-led, the Court said prayers at a “regularly scheduled school-sponsored function conducted on school property” would lead an objective observer to perceive it as state endorsement of religion. *Id.* at 308.

Like the prayer practices in *Santa Fe*, the prayers at District football games are also inappropriate and unconstitutional. Not only is the District endorsing these prayers by allotting time for them at the start of games, but it is also providing the prayer-giver with the public address system needed to impose these prayers on all students and community members at games. Public school events must be secular to protect the freedom of conscience of all students. A reasonable District student would certainly perceive the prayers “as stamped with her school’s seal of approval.” *Id.*

The District must take immediate action to end the practice of scheduling prayer at school-sponsored events and end the use of District equipment to project prayers to the public. Please inform us in writing of the steps the District is taking to remedy this serious violation of the First Amendment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Line". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Christopher Line
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation