

Is This School Board Being Told to Stop Prayer at Meetings?

While many school boards across the country have gone “woke” and are attempting to silence those wishing to profess their faith in public, there’s one in South Carolina where prayer has been encouraged and each recent school board meeting has begun with an invocation.

Predictably, however, that is now being challenged by a prominent atheist group who is demanding that Dorchester School District 2 based in Summerville halt its practice of opening official meetings with prayers from board members.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation, which has actively sought to shut down similar situations in the U.S. over a number of years, contacted the board to protest the prayers.

“We ask that the Board immediately cease imposing prayer upon students, staff and community members in order to comply with the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment and to respect the rights of every member of the community,” FRFF’s staff attorney wrote in a complaint letter sent earlier this month.

“Board members are free to pray privately or to worship on their own time in their own way. However, the Board ought not to lend its power and prestige to religion or coerce attendees into participating in religious exercise.”

In March 2021, FRFF sent a letter to school district officials, when a concerned parent alerted it to the board’s prayer practices. The FRFF was told the invocation issue had been resolved, but yet another parent informed the organization that it had returned in 2022.

In 2018, judges of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit issued a per curiam opinion in favor of FRFF after it sued a California school district that allowed board members to give sectarian prayers at its meetings.

It's not the first time this issue has come up in South Carolina. In June, Live 5 News reported that for the last three meetings, the Berkeley County School Board had designated a moment of silence, but some took advantage of that to recite the Lord's prayer out loud during that time.

Live News 5 reported that former Berkeley School Board member Ann Conder has been leading the prayer effort, and said that the board previously opened all meetings with thanks to the Lord until 2016.

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That year, however, South Carolina leaders passed the Public Invocation Act, which says that prayer at public meetings must not "advance any one faith or belief, or coerce participation by observers."

One parent, Sheryl Monk, took offense over the moment of silence.

"Frankly, I don't think they even need a moment of silence. But if you're going to have a moment of silence, be silent. Just don't push your religion on anyone else and I think this does all that," Monk told the news outlet.

For fear of legal repercussions, however, the board made the decision in 2016 to place on the agenda a moment of silence instead of the longstanding practice of opening prayer.

Conder told Live 5 News that recent rulings reinforce the right to prayer openings if they are rooted in tradition.

"I beseech you to reinstate that historical practice," Conder said. {eoa}

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