

Atheists Mad at Churches Feeding High School Football Team

An **atheist** group is accusing a Georgia high school football team of breaching the **First Amendment** by accepting meals from local churches.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) contacted the Walker County Schools over proselytizing complaints it reportedly received about a high school coach at Ridgeland High School in Rossville, Ga., less than 10 miles from downtown Chattanooga, Tenn.

In an Aug. 21 letter, FFRF staff attorney Andrew Seidel asked Walker County Schools Superintendent Damon Raines to investigate complaints over practices by Ridgeland High School football coach Mark Mariakis. According to FFRF's local complainant, Ridgeland conducts **prayers** at school football games, often organized or led by Mariakis.

"It is illegal for a public school athletic coach to lead a team in **prayer**," wrote Seidel, citing numerous legal cases including Supreme Court decisions.

The FFRF is accusing Mariakis of shuttling players to different churches for pre-game meals and "at these events the church's preacher sermonizes to the players about the Christian religion." Seidel called this practice an "egregious violation."

"It would be interesting to see what part of the Constitution we violated by simply offering a meal to fellow Americans," Richie White, youth director at the Chattanooga Valley Baptist Church, told Fox News. "These are kids from our area that we do love and we do care about."

White's church is scheduled to feed the football team in late October. He told Fox News a few of his church youth are on the football team and feeding the players has been a tradition to show support for the local athletes.

"We as Christians don't force our religion on anyone," White said. "We're being **persecuted** because we believe there is a God who created us. I don't think there's an equal playing field because we base our lives and our views on the Scripture."

FFRF is also calling attention to allegations that Mariakis uses Bible verses as motivational tools and places pressure on players to attend a religious football camp.

"Even if Mariakis is simply suggesting attendance, his position as head coach in charge of playing time, impregnates any suggestion with force. Playing time leads to scholarships and college; it should be a question of merit only, not religion," Seidel wrote.

FFRF warned the superintendent that the coach endangers federal funding if, as contended, he uses of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) as "a platform and a vehicle that allows us to share Christ with the kids." FCA is a student club and by law public employee involvement is strictly non-participatory.

The FFRF assault is real. The group in recent years successfully shut down school prayers at Soddy Daisy football games and graduations, and other Tennessee schools. FFRF won a lawsuit in the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals in 2004 against Rhea County, which declared unconstitutional devotional religious instruction in the schools, including a program to "teach the Bible as literal truth." Most recently, FFRF contacted the University of Tennessee-Chattanooga over prayers at public school athletic events.

"The Freedom From Religion Foundation has dedicated itself to

perverting the very real **First Amendment** freedom of religious expression for an imaginary freedom from religious expression,” Robert Jeffress, the pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, told Fox News. “It is time for all Christians to push back against the attempts of atheistic groups and judicial activists to erase our constitutional right of freedom of religious expression.”