

Time for a Hail Mary? School Threatens to Fire Praying Football Coach

A school district in Washington State has decided to play hardball with a football coach who refused to stop his mid-field, post-game prayers.

I received an exclusive copy of a three-page letter sent to Bremerton High School Coach Joe Kennedy from Superintendent Aaron Leavell.

The nutshell? Coach Joe must stop praying or he will be punished.

“Any further violations will be grounds for discipline, up to and including discharge from District employment,” Leavell wrote in an Oct. 23 letter.

I can only imagine what might happen should the coach have to call a Hail Mary play.

“I was really shocked,” Coach Joe told me. “I went out of my way to accommodate them. All I wanted to do was pray—and now I can’t even pray at all.”

For years the former Marine combat veteran would walk alone to the 50-yard line and offer a prayer of thanksgiving and blessing after football games. He drew inspiration for his post-game prayers from *Facing the Giants*, a popular faith-based film. Over the years, players and coaches from both teams would join him—on their own volition.

On Sept. 27, Leavell fired off a letter to the coach warning him to cease and desist.

“Your talks with students may not include religious

expression, including prayer," he wrote. "They must remain entirely secular in nature, so as to avoid alienation of any team member."

In his most recent letter, Leavell said the school district would be glad to provide a place for Coach Joe to pray—so long as it was in private—"not observable to students or the public."

"For example, a private location within the school building, athletic facility or press box could be made available to you for brief religious exercise before and after games," Superintendent Leavell wrote.

To be clear, Coach Joe is forbidden from bowing his head, taking a knee or doing anything that might remotely be construed as religious.

"While on duty for the District as an assistant coach, you may not engage in demonstrative religious activity, readily observable to (of not intended to be observed by) students and the attending public," the superintendent added.

That means he's not even allowed to bow his head behind the bleachers where the kids are smoking pot.

Liberty Institute, the nation's largest law firm specializing in religious liberty cases, is preparing to initiate legal proceedings against the school district—accusing them of religious discrimination.

"They've already punished Coach Joe by denying his request for religious accommodation," attorney Hiram Sasser told me. "Under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, they've already violated his civil rights."

Superintendent Leavell stressed in his letter that the district does not prohibit prayer or other religious exercises by its employees.

"However, it must prohibit any conduct by employees that would serve as District endorsement of religion," he said.

Sasser said the district's argument is outrageous.

"What they are saying is he cannot pray by himself, he cannot simply take a knee at the 50-yard-line," Sasser said. "That's like telling a coach he can't wear a yarmulke if he's Jewish, he can't wear a turban if he's a Sikh, he can't pray to Mecca if he's a Muslim, he can't wear a cross necklace if he's a Christian."

Late last week State Superintendent Randy Dorn released a statement backing the school district.

"It's unfortunate when the actions of one employee affect an entire district," Dorn said.

As if a football coach who prays for his team is doing engaged in some sort of criminal enterprise.

Dorn went on to suggest that teachers like Coach Joe are not good role models.

"School staff exercising their right to silently pray in private on their own is fine. But leading a prayer isn't," he said. "School officials are role models; leading a prayer might put a student in an awkward position, even if the prayer is voluntary. For students who don't share the official's faith, players, the official's public expression of faith can seem exclusionary or even distressing."

For the record, Coach Joe never invited anyone to pray with him—especially students. They chose to participate by their own free will.

Sasser said the state superintendent does have a point—there are people in the state of Washington who feel disenfranchised—Christians.

"When they find out a coach can't even silently pray at the 50-yard-line, there's no greater message of hostility than that," Sasser told me. "This is not a school being neutral. This is a school being hostile to religion—and we are going to hold them accountable."

Provided Coach Joe still has a job on Friday night, he plans to do what he's done after every other football game.

"I'm going to keep on praying," he said.