

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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July 20, 2026

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: bryan.pruitt@es.k12.ar.us

Bryan Pruitt
Superintendent
Eureka Springs School District
147 Greenwood Hollow Rd.
Eureka Springs, AR 72632

Re: Multiple constitutional violations

Dear Superintendent Pruitt:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding multiple constitutional violations in the Eureka Springs School District. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 41,000 members across the country, including members and a chapter in Arkansas. 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 community member has informed us that at Eureka Springs High School's 2026 graduation, a student led the audience in an "invocation," which mentioned Jesus's will and plan. According to the community member, the invocation appeared to have been approved by the school's administration given that it did not accompany any other speech from the prayer-giver and stood on its own as an independent part of the ceremony.

In addition, the District has made multiple social media posts from its official Instagram account promoting religious events. The posts include an Easter Parade promotion made on March 30th, 2026 and a post advertising a "Vacation Bible School" made on July 11th, 2026. The Easter Parade post features a prominent Latin cross and the "Vacation Bible School" post advertises that it is "Shining a light on who Jesus really is." Both posts include imagery of a local Baptist church. Please see the enclosed screenshots.

The community member who brought these instances to our attention expressed that they are concerned the District is violating the principle of separation of church and state.

We write to request that the District investigate and ensure that Eureka Springs High School refrains from including school-sponsored prayer at graduation and any other school-sponsored events and that the District refrain from promoting religion on its official social media.

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. *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, clergy member, 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 the 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)).

The District’s inclusion of school-sponsored prayer at graduation directly violates students’ First Amendment rights. The District cannot avoid a constitutional violation by assigning students to give invocations. Forcing students to observe, participate in, and reflect upon prayer as part of their graduation ceremony 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 the 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 Cnty. 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 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.¹ More than half of Generation Z (those born after 1996) is non-Christian, including 43 percent who are nonreligious.²

Promoting religious activities on official social media is unconstitutional

As we explained above, public schools have a duty to refrain from showing favoritism toward religion, and that duty applies to official school communications. The Supreme Court has described the power of social media sites as “the principal sources for knowing current events, checking ads for employment, speaking and listening in the modern public square, and otherwise exploring the vast realms of human thought and knowledge.” *Packingham v. North Carolina*, 582 U.S. 98, 107 (2017). Schools must be particularly diligent not to entangle religious beliefs with official pronouncements made in this “modern public square.”

Official school communications promoting religious events have the same effect of marginalizing non-Christian students as graduation prayer does. When a public school promotes a vacation Bible camp and Easter parade on its official Instagram, it sends a clear message that the District prefers students and families who adhere to Christianity over all others.

In order to protect students’ First Amendment rights, we urge the Eureka Springs School District to investigate and ensure that Eureka Springs High School refrains from including school-sponsored prayer at its graduation ceremonies. We also ask that the District refrain from using social media to promote religion. Please respond in writing with the steps the District is taking to address these matters so that we may inform the community member who contacted us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Samantha F. Lawrence". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Samantha" and last name "Lawrence" clearly legible.

Samantha F. Lawrence
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

SFL:trm

Enclosure

¹ Pew Research Center (2024), <http://bit.ly/3W6Cl3m>.

² Pew Research Center (2024), <http://bit.ly/48Drzce>.



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eurekaspringsschooldistrict We are sharing for anyone interested. Please contact First Baptist Church directly with any questions.

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eurekaspringsschooldistrict 🌸 Community Event 🌸

We're sharing a local community event for any interested families!

Join in on Saturday from 1:00-3:00 PM for an afternoon of:
Free food and drinks
Games for kids
Craft stations
Sweet treats

This event is being hosted by First Baptist Church downtown and is open to families looking for a fun, kid-friendly activity this weekend. 🍕

16w

7 likes
March 30

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