



January 18, 2005

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VIA FIRST CLASS MAIL
FACSIMILE AND EMAIL

Lynn Cleary, Principal
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Re: Coach-Led Prayers at Lincoln High School

Dear Dr. Harris and Ms. Cleary:

We were disturbed to read the two articles in yesterday's Ann Arbor News entitled, "Parents, Officials Shrug at Wrestling Team's Prayers" and "Can Prayer Really Help a Sports Team?" The articles describe in detail how the Lincoln High School wrestling coach regularly leads his athletes in prayer after practice and before wrestling meets. See <http://www.mlive.com/search/index.ssf?/base/news-11/110597649859900.xml?aanews?SHSW> and <http://www.mlive.com/search/index.ssf?/base/news-0/110597645759901.xml?aanews?NEJB>

Perhaps what is most unsettling about this matter is that the wrestling coach is leading prayer with the knowledge and apparent support of both the athletic director and Dr. Sharon Harris, the school superintendent. Indeed, Dr. Harris' quote, "As long as students are not being mandated to engage in prayer and feel that they can walk away if they choose to do so, there shouldn't be a problem." is inaccurate and misleading.

Dr. Harris' quote illustrates a fundamental misunderstanding of the constitutional prohibition on public school officials praying with their students. Public schools and their employees are required by the Establishment Clause and the Religious Freedom Clause of the First Amendment to remain neutral in

matters of religion at school. Administrators, teachers and coaches may not favor one religion over another and they may not favor religion over non-religion.

The U.S. Supreme Court has held that prayer at school events creates an unconstitutional danger of creating a coercive environment resulting from pressure by school officials, peers and the public. *Lee v. Weisman*, 112 S.Ct. 2649, 2658-61 (1992). Moreover, “[s]chool sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible because it sends the ancillary message to members of the audience who are 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.’” *Sante Fe Independent School District v. Doe*, 120 S.Ct. 2266, 2279 (2000), quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 699 (1984).

It is well established that a school official, teacher or coach may not constitutionally promote religion or prayer in school regardless of whether the students believe they have the option refrain from participating. For example, in *School District v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963), the Supreme Court struck down a school’s bible reading program as an unconstitutional endorsement of religion even though the student participation was voluntary and the program did not favor any religious sect. The courts have repeatedly held that it is unconstitutional for a coach, or other school official, to initiate or lead a team in prayer or ask a team member to do so, before, during or after a public or school-sponsored athletic activity or event. *Duncanville Independent School District v. John Doe*, 994 F.2d 160 (5th Cir. 1993); *Jager v. Douglas County School Dist.*, 862 F2d 824 (11th Cir. 1989).

Moreover, we are not sure that officials at the Lincoln Consolidated Schools fully understand the emotional toll that coach-led prayer can have on young athletes who are not Christian or who are not religious. Teenage athletes feel tremendous peer pressure to fit in and to be “part of the team.” They also want to please the coach and, whether true or not, many students feel that if they don’t please the coach, they will get less playing time or attention. Even if the coach states that participation in team prayer is voluntary, coach-led team prayer is inherently coercive.

Occasionally, there may be student athletes who, because they are atheists or not Christian, resist the implicit pressure of teammates and coaches and stand to the side while the rest of the team prays with the coach. As courageous as these student may be, they typically feel ostracized and alienated from the group and question whether they belong on the team. When not every athlete participates in coach-led prayer, the practice can easily lead to divisions among the team rather than team unity.

Additionally, it is possible that a student who is uncomfortable with coach-led prayer may decide against joining a particular team – or playing any sports at all – rather than face the humiliation of sitting out of the team prayer. It is difficult enough already for non-Christian or atheist teenagers to grow up in this country feeling that they are “true Americans.” They should not be made to feel like second-class citizens on their own public school athletic teams.

There is obviously nothing wrong with the district hiring a coach who is deeply religious. However, all coaches must realize – and the administration must emphasize – that public schools are not the place to

proselytize. Coaches should not proselytize at public schools not only because it is unconstitutional, but because it is the wrong thing to do. Lincoln High School has a diverse student body and all students should be made to feel welcome to participate in all aspects of the school regardless of their religion, lack of religion, race, ethnicity or sex.

We strongly urge you to reconsider the position taken by the school district in the newspaper and to consult with the district's attorney immediately. Please write or call ACLU of Michigan legal director Michael Steinberg at the number below by the end of the week to let him know whether the district will insist that the high school wrestling coach and all other coaches in the district refrain from leading prayers with their teams.

It is our hope that this letter will resolve the issue without the need for litigation. However, if necessary, we will immediately explore the possibility of filing a federal lawsuit seeking an injunction.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Very truly yours,

David Santacroce, Pres. Washtenaw Co. ACLU	Kary Moss, Exec. Director ACLU of Michigan	Michael J. Steinberg, Legal Director ACLU of Michigan (313) 578-6814 msteinberg@aclumich.org
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