



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on May 29, 2013

Despite Atheist Objections, Prayer Offered at Kentucky High School Graduation

As in past years, prayer took its rightful place during the May 24 graduation ceremony at Lincoln County High School in Stanford, Kentucky, despite the intense efforts of a contingent of students and local residents who tried to put a stop to it. According to [Central Kentucky News](#), senior class president Jonathan Hardwick received an extended standing ovation after delivering the traditional graduation prayer, which was affirmed with a chorus of “Amens” from many moms, dads, and grandparents in attendance.



“Thank you for helping us get here safely today, Lord,” Hardwick prayed in part, “and thank you for the many blessings you have given us.” A video of the prayer has gone viral on [YouTube](#), with the comments overwhelmingly in favor of the invocation that riled local non-believers, and has undoubtedly drawn the attention of the Freedom From Religion Foundation and other atheist attack groups.

According to *Central Kentucky News*, Lincoln County High School Principal Tim Godbey “acknowledged that six students — including at least one atheist — had pleaded with him not to allow student-led prayer to be a part of the school’s graduation ceremony. Godbey, a self-professed Christian who says he prays for each of his students daily, said under separation of church and state laws, faculty members have never been able to pray publicly on school grounds or during school-sponsored functions. However, he noted that the U.S. Constitution does not prohibit students from doing so as long as they are not otherwise disruptive.”

One of the students who objected to the prayer told a news reporter for local TV station WKYT that as an atheist he didn’t want to be forced to sit through a prayer at his graduation. “This is a place for school, not a church,” the student said. “I feel like I’m graduating from Lincoln County High, not Lincoln County church.”

Joining in the effort to silence the graduation prayer was local atheist activist Ricky Smith, who appears to be at the forefront of a campaign to remove public prayers not just from school programs, but from city meetings as well in nearby Boyle County. “Earlier this year, Smith privately asked Boyle County Judge-Executive Harold McKinney to stop magistrates from saying Judeo-Christian prayers during government meetings,” reported *Central Kentucky News*. “After being ‘outed’ on social media websites as an atheist and the man responsible for magistrates switching to a ‘moment of silence,’ Smith went public with his cause. Magistrates ultimately voted to return to their long-standing tradition of opening meetings with a prayer, but said they would keep Judeo-Christian terms out of their public prayers.”

As he has done in government meetings, Smith protested the prayer at the Lincoln County High School graduation by standing up and walking out of the ceremony. Outside the school Smith was met by local residents carrying signs supporting the prayer, an action he defined as somehow ominous. “Having



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church groups at the entrance of the school makes non-Christian students as well as their family members and friends feel uncomfortable and even threatened,” Smith told the local newspaper.

Central Kentucky News reported,

Smith intends to notify the American Civil Liberties Union and the Freedom From Religion Foundation about Lincoln’s public prayer, which he feels violated the civil rights of students who are not Christians. Smith — a former Christian — pointed out that some students represent a variety of faiths or lack thereof, including Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, paganism, atheism, and agnosticism.

As for the student body’s majority Christian contingent, their opinion of the prayer was reflected in a comment from Lincoln County High School junior Shawna Ingram, one of the leaders in the school’s student-led prayer group. She pointed out that the graduation prayer is intended to “pour out God’s blessing upon the whole graduating class. Whether you believe in Him or not, that prayer is for every student. We just want to send out every graduating senior with God’s blessing for the rest of their life.”



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