



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on March 5, 2012

## Florida Bill Allowing School Prayer Reaches Governor's Desk

The measure, however, requires that the inspirational messages be “nonsectarian and nonproselytizing in nature,” and stipulates that they also must be offered without any influence from school officials and only at the discretion of student government.

The [Orlando Sentinel](#) reported that the measure is the result of several years of effort by Democratic State Senator Gary Siplin, along with GOP State Representative Charles Van Zant, who has a Masters of Divinity degree. Reported the *Sentinel*: “Van Zant said that the bill was not about prayer, but about ‘inspirational’ messaging and free speech. He also said student-crafted messages — faculty and staff are banned from involvement — would bring a tone of respect and civility to the classroom.”



“Before we removed inspirational messages, the No. 1 problem was talking out of turn,” Van Zant said, recalling the days before the Supreme Court banned prayer in school. “Now, it’s drug abuse.”

State Representative Michael Bileca, another of the bill’s sponsors, explained that the measure would help schools fulfill the purpose of education, which “is to inspire, not just to get a job, but to inspire our children to virtue, to wisdom, to reach beyond what they believe they are capable of themselves.”

Opponents said that a lack of guidelines in the bill could give students an open door to say whatever they wanted, including messages that could hurt others. “They can distort well established historical facts,” complained State Representative Marty Kiar. “For example, you can have a child that has a misguided view of the world who could preach that the Holocaust never occurred, who could preach anti-civil rights language to a bunch of students, and they’ll be doing this when a teacher cannot monitor them because in the bill it says they cannot be monitored.”

Critics warned that the measure could invite a free-for-all with students drawing from offensive “faith” groups for their “inspirational” messages. During debate of the bill, one opponent, Representative Jeff Clemons, read from something called the “Aryan Satanic Manifesto” and asked Van Zant if it would pass as “inspirational” under the measure’s guidelines. “That would be the students’ prerogative because of our constitutional freedom of speech,” VanZant replied.

Predictably, the ACLU also offered its legal wisdom on the matter, with the head of its Florida franchise, Howard Simon, [issuing a statement](#) warning that passage of the bill would “trigger a landslide of litigation. Just one lawsuit in Florida involving school sanctioned religious activity in Santa Rosa County took years to resolve and cost the district more than \$500,000 in fees and costs. Imagine that in 66 more counties.”



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Similarly, the Anti-Defamation League's David Barkey complained that the measure "crosses the line between church and state" and could be used to target ethnic and religious minorities. "How would a student, or the school community for that matter, deal with a racist or anti-Semitic message, or a message that disparages individuals on the basis of ethnicity, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, or disability?" he asked.

But Jerry Newcombe of the Florida-based Truth in Action Ministries, applauded the bill as a vehicle that would help move schools past religion-free zones. "What we have now is massive censorship of God from our public schools," he told the *Sentinel*. "We're teaching kids that they're basically the product of time and chance and random force. Then we're shocked when they commit acts of violence." He added that his group's founder, noted Christian pastor Dr. D. James Kennedy, would have endorsed the measure, and that he favored school prayer that included Jews, Muslims, and Christians.

State Rep. Fred Costello, another of the Republican lawmakers who pushed the bill, said he hoped "many of our students choose to use their time for an inspirational message to offer a prayer, whether that be to God, to Jesus, to Mohammad, to Buddha, or the Great Spirit."

Governor Scott indicated that he would sign the bill, which will become law in July. "As you know, I believe in Jesus Christ," he said, "and I believe that individuals should have the right to say a prayer."



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