



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on September 10, 2012

Georgia High School Students Defy Atheist Group Over Prayer Prohibition

For the past 50 years or so the Friday night football games at Haralson County High School in Tallapoosa, Georgia have started the same way, with prayer, most recently offered by the team's chaplain, a local minister. But September 7 the tradition of reverence and faith came to a screeching halt as the school district's superintendent, Brett Stanton, caved in to the intimidation of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, which demanded that the school stop allowing prayer over the football stadium's PA system. A year earlier the district had received the customary letter of warning from FFRF attorney Stephanie Schmitt declaring that "it is illegal for a public school to organize, sponsor and lead prayers at public high school athletic events."



The FFRF's intrusion came as the result of complaints by Frank and Sarah McIntire, a local couple whose son plays on the football team. According to the [CBS News](#) affiliate in Atlanta, the McIntires "explained they just felt uncomfortable with some of the messages they were forced to hear before the game." The couple claimed the complaint was all about honoring the Constitution. "We didn't mean for it to get this far," said Frank McIntire. "All we wanted was to abide by the Supreme Court ruling.... It's been totally blown out of proportion...."

Of course, that is not the view of the FFRF, which considered it a victory when the school board decided to trash the 50-year tradition based on the atheist group's tenuous claim that the Constitution's First Amendment bars local communities from sanctioning prayer in their schools or government meetings. In response to the FFRF letter, the board decided it would be better to cave in to the atheist group's demands rather than face a potential lawsuit — which the FFRF often threatens but seldom follows through on.

"We have recently been faced with the threat of legal action regarding prayer from the public address system before home football games," Stanton explained in a prepared statement. "Personally, it saddens me since my faith is a very important part of my life." Nonetheless, he added, "from a professional standpoint and as the superintendent of the Haralson County Schools, I have a responsibility to protect the school system from litigation. This is very difficult for our board members, employees and for me, but ... we will abide by the guidelines set forth by the Constitution of the United States" — as interpreted to them by the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

While the FFRF has succeeded in silencing the sanctioned prayers of schools across America in its campaign to sanitize the nation of faith, it has not as yet found a method of stifling citizens themselves. Thus, at the beginning of the Haralson County Rebels' first home game, students, parents, and others in attendance used the "moment of silence" that replaced the forbidden prayer to recite the Lord's Prayer



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in unison.

"By state law, prayer can still be led by students, and that's what will happen here Friday night," the Rev. Mason Bush, pastor off Tallapoosa's Providence Baptist Church, advised the local [Douglas County Sentinel](#) in advance of the game. "The children have taken it upon themselves to stand up for what they believe in. Students from the football team, the band, and the cheer team have all volunteered to lead prayer on Friday night."

Bush had been the team's chaplain for the previous 15 years, until the FFRF began its assault on the district. "I'm sad to say the lawsuit started here four years ago because of me holding prayer," he recalled. "Some people moved here from out of state and didn't like what we were doing. This year, it's all come to a head, so I will not be leading the prayers anymore."

Of course, community residents expressed their overwhelming support for the prayers. "This country was founded by Christians, our forefathers were Christians, some of them were even ministers," said Tallapoosa City Councilman Dan Pope. "We've always had prayer before the games. It saddens me that this is the point we've gotten to in our country when a minority can tell the majority what they're going to do." Pope encouraged parents and others to show up at the game to join the "unofficial" student-led prayer, many of whom did just that.

"I am upset because I think our God-given rights are being taken away ... ," another resident, Melinda Holden, told CBS News. "We are a God-believing community and we have our rights too. This is needed in our community. If you don't want to support the prayer then allow us to have our say."

The *Douglas County Sentinel* noted that Providence Baptist Church "is still providing meals for the team, at a cost of \$5,000 a year," a gesture that rankles the FFRF. As reported by [The New American](#), the the atheist assault group recently attacked another Georgia high school for allowing local churches to feed its football team, calling the practice "unconstitutional." In the case of the Haralson County High School, parents of football players "signed waivers allowing their children to attend the meal at the church," reported the *Sentinel*. "The stipulation remains, however, that the pastor cannot say anything while the team is there."

But Mason Bush, the church's pastor, noted that "some of the boys have stepped up and led prayer themselves. I'm so proud these kids are fighting for what they believe in." He added that "it breaks my heart to know one or two voices have come to dictate for a whole community. But since this has happened, I've seen our community come together. People from all religions are going to stand up and fight this."

Another local pastor, the Rev. Jason Hatchett of Tallapoosa's First Baptist Church, told the *Sentinel* that he has contacted [Liberty Counsel](#), a conservative legal advocacy group, for advice on how to battle the atheist assault against his community. "We just want to see what our options are to approach it in the proper way," he said. "In general, we're just tired of being run over. I'd like to see people come together and say 'no' to the government telling us what we can and can't do. It's a freedom issue. Anyone should be able to pray, no matter what religion they are. Stifling all of it really isn't an option."



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