



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on September 20, 2012

Pa. School Battles Atheist Group Over Ten Commandments Display

A Ten Commandments monument that has graced the landscape of a Pennsylvania high school for decades is the latest target of the atheist attack group Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF). The group has filed suit in U.S. District Court to have the granite display, erected by a local organization years ago, removed from the front of Valley High School in the community of New Kensington. The atheists claim that the parents of children who attend the school had complained about the unobtrusive display. The FFRF refers to the religious display as a “tombstone-like monument,” complaining that it is “directly in front of the main school entrance, near two footbridges that students and visitors use to enter the building.”



The monument was a gift to the school from the local chapter of the Fraternal Order of Eagles, a national organization that was responsible for thousands of similar monuments placed at city halls, courthouses, and schools across America in the mid-1950s. The FFRF has made the forced removal of such displays one of its obsessions, and sent a letter last March to the local school superintendent, via FFRF staff attorney Patrick Elliott, claiming that the monument somehow violates the First Amendment’s mandate that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.” The FFRF filed its lawsuit after the school district disregarded its letter.

To their credit, as the [FFRF](#) acknowledged in its own press release on the matter, both school officials and local religious and civic leaders have stepped forward to defend their community’s right to determine what it will allow in the realm of religious expression. School board president Robert Pallone “wrote in March on the Facebook webpage called ‘[Keep the Ten Commandments at Valley High School](#),’ that the district would not ‘remove this monument without a fight,’” noted the FFRF. It added that local clergy “held a rally during the school day in front of Valley High School to support the decision to retain the religious monument.”

While the FFRF claims the monument “impermissibly coerces students to ... adopt the favored religious view of the district,” and must be removed, Matt Staver of the conservative [Liberty Counsel](#), a legal advocacy group that has successfully defended other groups against atheist assaults, recalled that in 2005 the Supreme Court decided for such a Ten Commandments monument in a similar case. In *Van Orden v. Perry*, noted Staver, the supposedly offending display was “a six-foot-tall, two-ton granite monument with the Ten Commandments that said ‘I am the Lord, thy God’ in large, capital letters at the very top. And the Supreme Court upheld that as constitutional.”

And so will the courts in this case, speculates Staver. “The Freedom From Religion Foundation simply



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thinks that by sending a letter, they can wipe the landscape clean of our Judeo-Christian heritage and history and anything that smacks of any relation to religion,” he said. “No matter how educational it may be, they want to remove it.”

In [related news](#), officials at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville are standing firm against FFRF demands that they suspend the traditional pre-game prayer at the school’s football games in Neyland Stadium. As reported by Yahoo News, FFRF spokeswoman Annie Laurie Gaylor noted that the school is a “public university, not a Christian club. It’s open to all comers and should be welcoming.” Gaylor insisted that for atheists and those of other faiths, the pre-game prayer is “really very grating. It’s a sock in the gut for you to go for a sporting event and then be told to conform to someone else’s religion.”

Officials of the university disagreed, however, and, unlike the University of Tennessee-Chattanooga, which was intimidated into replacing its pre-game prayer with a “moment of silence,” officials at the Knoxville school responded to the FFRF’s letter by stating that its university’s pre-game prayers do not violate the First Amendment, and would continue as usual.

“I appreciate your concern about this issue, and I want to assure you that I have given this issue careful consideration,” University of Tennessee Chancellor Jimmy Cheek graciously responded by letter to Gaylor and the FFRF. “At this time, however, the university will continue to allow prayers before university events consistent with the Chaudhuri case” — the case the FFRF cited as precedent to force the university to suspend its pre-game invocation.



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