



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on March 10, 2011

Rhode Island School District Battles ACLU Over Prayer Banner

A Rhode Island school district has decided to fight the ACLU rather than remove a prayer banner that has been displayed in its high school for nearly 50 years. With some 200 supporters in attendance at a March 7 meeting on the issue, the school committee of Cranston, a suburb of Providence, voted 4-3 to continue displaying the banner, which has been hanging in the Cranston High School West auditorium since 1963.



A gift of the school's first graduating class, the banner includes a prayer written by one of the school's students, and addresses "Our Heavenly Father," beseeching Him, "Grant us each day the desire to do our best, to grow mentally and morally as well as physically; to be kind and helpful to our classmates and teachers; to be honest with ourselves as well as with others. Help us to be good sports and smile when we lose as well as when we win. Teach us the value of true friendship. Help us always to conduct ourselves so as to bring credit to Cranston High School West." The prayer, which students at one point in the school's history would repeat on occasion, concludes with a solemn "Amen."

Displayed for five decades without incident or protest, and mostly ignored by the last couple of generations making their way through Cranston's halls of learning, the simple prayer was too much for the "civil liberties" watchdog, and last July the ACLU's state chapter asked the school district to remove the banner, arguing that the prayer violated the First Amendment's supposed separation of church and state clause.

After several months of discussion on how to respond to the liberal legal group's unsettling demand, the school committee ultimately took the advice of the thousands of local residents who had signed a petition in support of the banner, voting to allow the high school banner, as well as a similar one at the local middle school, to continue offering silent entreaty from the school's auditorium wall.

Predictably, the ACLU's state director, Steven Brown, indicated that he and a team of litigious-minded attorneys would meet "over the next few days" to strategize about the inevitable lawsuit. "We did everything in our power to try to informally resolve this," Brown told the [Providence Journal](#). "We gave



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them eight months to resolve this.”

According to the *Journal*, “the School Committee set up a working group to look into legal partners, including the city, which could defend the School Department for free if the lawsuit is filed. Donors have been urged to mail their checks to the department, noting on the check that the money is intended for the prayer’s defense fund.”

School superintendent Peter L. Nero, who had originally suggested that the district avoid a legal fight by simply rewording the prayer to eliminate the offending “Our Heavenly Father” and “Amen,” said he now thinks the banner is worth fighting to save. “I’m not saying that we won’t settle for something else,” he said, but “no fight to me would be losing by default.”

Some legal observers speculated that ultimately a conservative legal advocacy group such as the American Center for Law and Justice or the Alliance Defense Fund, both of which have had years of experience in defending individuals and organizations against the machinations of the ACLU, will step forward to defend the school district.

Photo: Entrance to Cranston High School West.



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