

**MESSAGE TO STUDENT SPEAKERS IN TEXAS SCHOOLS: STUDENT COUNCIL OFFICERS, CLASS OFFICERS OF HIGHEST GRADE LEVEL IN THE SCHOOL, FOOTBALL TEAM CAPTAINS, AND OTHER STUDENT LEADERS AS DESIGNATED BY THE SCHOOL DISTRICT
(YOU CAN STILL PRAY IN THE U.S.A.)
by KELLY COGLAN**

There is a new law in Texas. The law is entitled the "Religious Viewpoints Antidiscrimination Act" (also known as the "Schoolchildren's Religious Liberties Act). The law is applicable to all Texas public schools. Every student and parent should read the NEW LAW (go to www.ChristianAttorney.com to print new law).

The first paragraph of the new law reads:

A school district shall treat a student's voluntary expression of a religious viewpoint, if any, on an otherwise permissible subject in the same manner the district treats a student's voluntary expression of a secular or other viewpoint on an otherwise permissible subject and may not discriminate against the student based on a religious viewpoint expressed by the student on an otherwise permissible subject.

The remainder of the law shows school districts how to properly apply this legal standard. The law covers the following: Student Expression of Religious Viewpoints, Student Speakers at Non-Graduation Events, Student Speakers at Graduation Ceremonies, Religious Expressions in Class Assignments, and Freedom to Organize Religious Groups and Activities. The law puts students' religious viewpoints (including prayer) on a level playing field with secular (non-religious), and other viewpoints.

The law does not require or suggest that students publicly pray or express any religious viewpoint, but it protects students if they do. While school officials, teachers and coaches (while at school, on school time, or in any way acting in their official capacities) are constitutionally prohibited from requiring or suggesting to students that they pray to open football games, the beginning of the school day or other school events, student speakers have the constitutional right to chose to do so. Also, parents, pastors, fellow students and any others who are not school officials, employees, teachers or coaches have the constitutional right to encourage student speakers to publicly pray to honor God and ask Him to bless their schools, students, teachers, and those in attendance at various school events.

Football Games and Beginning of the School Day:

The new law has a model policy that is recommended for school districts to adopt. Every Texas school district must adopt a written policy that complies with the new law before school begins. Under the model policy, a student leader will publicly introduce (1) the beginning of each football game, (2) the opening announcements and greetings for the school day, and (3) any other events designated by the school district. The eligible student leaders who will be giving these introductions are (1) Student Council Officers, (2) Class Officers of the highest grade level in the school, (3) Captains of the football team, and (4) any other category of student leaders whose selection is based on neutral criteria as may be designated by the school district. The speakers will rotate in order throughout the year as occasions arise. The policy is designed so that it will be a great honor to be a student-speaker for school events. Any student who is notified that they are eligible to be a student speaker for the year should immediately accept the invitation without hesitation for it will be an immense honor and opportunity.

Student speakers should draft their remarks so that their introductions of school events are "related to the purpose of the event and to the purpose of marking the opening of the event, honoring the occasion, the participants, and those in attendance, bringing the audience to order, and focusing the audience on the purpose of the event." This may include a prayer as long as the subjects of the prayer are subjects upon which the student is permitted to speak (i.e. "related to the purpose of the

event and to the purpose of marking the opening of the event, honoring the occasion, the participants, and those in attendance, bringing the audience to order, and focusing the audience on the purpose of the event"). As a simple example, since safety and good sportsmanship are directly related to the purpose of athletic events as well as honoring the events, the participants and those in attendance, one student might open the event by saying something like "Let us have a safe game tonight, may no one get injured, may everyone play fair...." (a secular, non-religious viewpoint on the topics of safety and sportsmanship) while another student might open with a religious-viewpoint (prayer) saying something like "God, let us have a safe game tonight, and please protect us all from injury; And please provide us with an atmosphere of respect for each other, sportsmanship, and fair play; We ask your blessing on this event, on all those in attendance, on our schools, and on our students..., in Jesus name, Amen" (a religious viewpoint on the topic of safety and sportsmanship), and the school must treat both expressions with equality. **A student will not get in trouble for choosing to publicly pray.**

Prayer is the expression of a "religious viewpoint" on the subjects the prayer mentions. If a student expresses a prayer as an introduction of a school event, the new law requires the school to treat the religious expression the same as a non-religious expression on the same topic and the school "may not discriminate against the student based on a religious viewpoint expressed by the student on an otherwise permissible subject."

For many years, students have been reluctant to stand up and express their faith in public schools for fear of being disciplined. Students should no longer have such fear. Schools are not religion-free zones; school officials are not prayer police; and students of faith are not enemies of the state. The new law makes this clear

Graduation Ceremonies:

The new law also covers graduation ceremonies. Under the model policy, a student speaker will open and a student speaker will close graduation ceremonies. Each student may do so with a prayer. Throughout the history of graduation ceremonies, prayer has traditionally been the means of opening and closing graduations. A student must be sure that their prayer is "related to the purpose of the graduation ceremony and to the purpose of marking the opening and closing of the event, honoring the occasion, the participants, and those in attendance, bringing the audience to order, and focusing the audience on the purpose of the event." If a student expresses a prayer to open or close a graduation ceremony, the new law requires the school to treat the religious expression the same as a non-religious expression on the same topic and "may not discriminate against the student based on a religious viewpoint expressed by the student on an otherwise permissible subject."

Student speakers such as valedictorians who will make graduation speeches will be free to share and discuss their faith when such expressions are on the subjects upon which they are permitted to speak: "The subject of the addresses must be related to the purpose of the graduation ceremony, marking and honoring the occasion, honoring the participants and those in attendance, and the student's perspective on purpose, achievement, life, school, graduation, and looking forward to the future." The schools must treat such speeches the same as those expressing secular and other viewpoints on the same subjects and "may not discriminate against the student based on a religious viewpoint expressed by the student on an otherwise permissible subject."

If You Chose to Pray:

What a privilege it is to have the freedom to publicly pray in America when such an act would be illegal in many other countries.

If you chose to say a prayer, realize that this is your individual prayer and not the school's prayer. Prior to 1962, prayers led by schools were common. But in 1962 the Supreme Court held that government prayers in public schools are unconstitutional. On the other hand, individual voluntary prayers by students--even if publicly stated--have never been held to be unconstitutional. You, as a

student, are therefore speaking for yourself, and your prayer is your own individual expression (not that of the school district's).

You are not "leading" the audience in prayer. Therefore, do not say "Will you please join me in prayer" or "Let us pray" or "Let us all join together in prayer." No one should feel compelled to join in with your prayer. You could say, however, "I have selected to open our game (or school day, or event) with prayer." And you could add, "For those of you who would like to join me, I invite you to do so." Or you need not give any introduction to your prayer but just say it when you step to the microphone.

With regard to all school events mentioned herein, a Christian student may always end his or her prayer "in Jesus' name, Amen"—there is nothing unconstitutional about using the name of "Jesus," and Christians should never be afraid to humbly use the name as Biblically directed. [i]
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ⁱ Why end a prayer "in Jesus' name, Amen"? Not every American student is Christian, so, not all will end a prayer "in Jesus' name." But why do Christians? The phrase, "in Jesus' name," is not a tag line intended to proselytize or to offend Jews, Moslems, atheists, or others but is said to comply with a basic tenant of the Christian faith: John 16:24,26: [Jesus said,] "Until now you have asked for nothing **in My name. Ask and you will receive**, that your joy may be made full....In that day you will ask **in My name....**" John 14:13,14: [Jesus said,] "And whatever you ask **in My name** that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything **in My name**, I will do it." John 15:16: [Jesus said,] "... so that whatever you **ask** of the Father **in My name**, He may give it to you." Colossians 3:17: "And whatever you do in word or deed, **do all in the name of the Lord Jesus**, giving thanks through Him to God the Father." Acts 3:6: "I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have, I give to you: **"In the name of Jesus Christ** the Nazarene--walk!" Acts 4:12: "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other **name** under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved." John 12:32: [Jesus said,] "If **I be lifted up**, I will draw all men to myself."

For someone to attempt to prohibit or discourage a Christian from ending a prayer "in Jesus' name" would not only cause the person to violate his or her conscience but would cause the individual to violate a basic commandment of his or her faith.

If someone prays in the name of "Jesus" and the listener is a non-adherent to that name, the listener may believe that the person has prayed to nothing. How can one logically be offended if they believe someone has spoken to the air? There are many children who believe in Santa Claus and tell others of their faith in and their petitions to him. Does this offend anyone? A reasoned reaction might be amusement, but not insult. The same should be true concerning religious expressions. Another's prayer should offend no one any more than a child's heart-felt proclamation of "Santa Claus is coming to town." A sincere prayer is not intended to offend anyone but rather to honor God and seek protection and blessing for believers and non-believers alike. The idea of a person being offended by the expression of another's sincere prayer "in Jesus' name" may simply be a euphemism for intolerance.