

## Case 12 ♦ Prayer at Middle School Graduation

The Riverside School District in Lake City, Arkansas, recently opted to cancel its elementary school graduation ceremonies after receiving letters from the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). The organizations contacted school officials on behalf of an anonymous parent who was concerned about the scheduled inclusion of Christian prayer at the event.

In previous years the school's graduation ceremony had been opened by a Christian pastor and was closed with student-led prayer. Describing the school district's response, superintendent Tommy Knight explained, "[t]hose campuses for the last several years had discussed whether we should continue with sixth grade graduation or not. The controversy arose out of this one. When it came to my attention, the board and I decided to go ahead and discontinue sixth grade graduations."<sup>1</sup>

When asked about the cancelation, Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, described the school board's decision as "a foolish, ridiculous response." According to Lynn, "[w]hen the Constitution says you cannot have a prayer at a graduation, the answer is get rid of the prayer not get rid of the entire graduation for all of the children."

While many students and parents were predictably upset about the cancelation, a group of parents arranged an alternative graduation ceremony at a nearby church where everyone — including non- Christians — was welcome to attend. Kelly Adams, one of the parents who supported the alternative graduation, framed this issue as a loss of basic rights: "I understand that they have rights too, but you can't take rights away from one group and give them to another. We are Christians and have a right to pray wherever we want."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Todd Starnes, "School Cancels Graduation over Prayer Controversy," Fox News, May 8, 2013, <http://radio.foxnews.com/toddstarnes/top-stories/school-cancels-graduation-over-prayer-controversy.html>

<sup>2</sup> "School Cancels 6th Grade Graduation Prayer Ceremony," Region 8 News, May 14, 2013, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DN\\_BpqDVMNU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DN_BpqDVMNU)