

## JOINT STATEMENT OF



### **TO OFFICIALS OF BASTROP HIGH SCHOOL AND THE TRUSTEES OF THE BASTROP INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT REGARDING PRAYER AT GRADUATION CEREMONIES**

May 26, 2011

Our organizations are deeply troubled by Bastrop High School's long history of presenting prayers as part of the official program at graduation ceremonies. Although the Supreme Court made it abundantly clear almost two decades ago that public schools cannot include prayers as part of school events, School District officials have persisted with this practice.

Only when a student complained and threatened to sue did the School District take steps to discontinue the practice by replacing the prayer with a moment-of-silence. The steps taken, however, were far from effective. Instead of having a school official introduce the moment-of-silence — which would have ensured that the opportunity was not abused — school officials turned to a student. Not surprisingly, the student chose to deliver the Lord's Prayer — while school officials sat idly by. To date, no apology has been delivered to the community by Bastrop High School officials or the Board of Trustees, for either past or recent events.

It is certainly not surprising that the student did not obey the School's express directions, for she has been educated by a school system that has itself chosen to flout constitutional requirements. The school system's longstanding disregard for constitutional norms has predictably bred a culture of noncompliance. This persistent culture will remain entrenched unless and until the School District takes at least some of the following actions:

- Issue a statement to the community and its students explaining the District's legal duty to enforce and abide by the legal prohibition on the public schools' sponsorship of graduation prayer, and assuring the community that past events will not recur. The School should use this opportunity to further its mission to educate the community and future graduating classes about legal requirements.
- Issue an apology to the student complainant, who was treated as a pariah not just by the community but by the School itself. Instead, he should have been honored for protecting a precious constitutional principle and calling the District's attention to a longstanding, egregious violation of the law.

- Consider disciplining the student for insubordination to the same extent that it would discipline other similar infractions, insofar as the District retains jurisdiction to do so. The student's insubordination is especially troubling here because of the School's history of sponsoring and encouraging prayers in the past.
- In the future, the school system should ensure that graduation exercises are not exploited to present religious messages. The moment-of-silence can be presented by a school official rather than a student. If a student is used, the District cannot passively sit by if the student once again abuses this opportunity.

We urge Bastrop Independent School District officials to assure the community of their intent to comply with constitutional requirements. A decision to remain silent would serve to confirm that the prayer that was presented at the 2011 graduation was just the most recent in a long line of unconstitutional District-sponsored prayers.

For further information, please contact:

Stephanie Schmitt  
 Staff Attorney  
 Freedom From Religion  
 Foundation  
 PO Box 750  
 Madison, WI 53701  
 Tel: (608) 256-8900  
 Email: stephanie@ffrf.org

Ayesha Khan  
 Legal Director  
 Americans United for  
 Separation of Church and State  
 1301 K Street, NW  
 East Tower, Suite 850  
 Washington, D.C. 20005  
 Tel: (202) 466-3234  
 Email: khan@au.org

Daniel Mach  
 Director  
 ACLU Program on Freedom of  
 Religion and Belief  
 915 15<sup>th</sup> St., NW  
 Washington, DC 20005  
 Tel: (202) 548-6604  
 Email: dmach@dcaclu.org

Marjorie Esman  
 Executive Director  
 ACLU of Louisiana  
 PO Box 56157  
 New Orleans, LA 70156  
 Tel: (504) 522-0628  
 Email: mesman@laaclu.org