

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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November 1, 2023

**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: [krwaters@tattnall.k12.ga.us](mailto:krwaters@tattnall.k12.ga.us)**

Kristen Waters  
Superintendent  
Tattnall County School District  
P.O. Box 157  
Reidsville, GA 30453

Re: Unconstitutional religious coercion in football program

Dear Superintendent Waters:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation occurring in the Tattnall County School District. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including more than 600 members and a local chapter in Georgia. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

A concerned District community member has reported that Tattnall County High School football coach Isaac Ferrell has been using his position to push his personal religious beliefs onto players. Our complainant reports that on October 24, 2023, Coach Ferrell invited a local pastor to attend football practice where he was allowed to proselytize students and baptize them on school grounds. This incident was posted on a Facebook page entitled “Tattnall County Football” with the caption, “Yesterday after practice Coach Ferrell gave the guys the opportunity to be baptized by Pastor Few. 20 young men made the decision to go #ALLIN with Christ!! Show them some support. #BiggerThanFootball.” Please see the enclosed screenshot.

We write to request that the District investigate this situation and ensure that this school-sponsored religious coercion ends immediately. The District must refrain from infusing its football program with religion, and Coach Ferrell cannot be allowed to preach to student athletes or allow a local pastor to preach to and baptize students. All coaches and staff should be instructed regarding their obligations as public school employees.

Student athletes have the First Amendment right to be free from religious indoctrination when participating in their public school’s athletics program. It is illegal for public school athletic coaches to invite or instruct others, such as pastors, to lead their team in prayer or other religious activities, including proselytizing and baptisms. The Supreme Court has continually struck down school-sponsored religious exercises in public schools. *See, e.g., Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 308 (2000) (holding student-led prayer over the loudspeaker before football

games unconstitutional.); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992) (finding prayers at public high school graduations an impermissible establishment of religion); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38 (1985) (overturning law requiring daily “period of silence not to exceed one minute . . . for meditation or daily prayer”); *Sch. Dist. of Abington Twp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963) (holding school-sponsored devotional Bible reading and recitation of the Lord’s Prayer unconstitutional); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962) (declaring school-sponsored prayers in public schools unconstitutional).

Student athletes are especially susceptible to coercion. Students know that their coaches control their playing time and positions, directly affecting students’ opportunities for college scholarships and recruitment. When coaches invite a pastor to repeatedly preach to student athletes and try to convince those students to be baptized, the students will no doubt feel that participating in these religious activities is essential to pleasing their coaches and being viewed as a team player. It is unrealistic and unconstitutional to put student athletes to the choice of allowing their constitutional rights to be violated in order to maintain good standing in the eyes of their coaches and peers or openly dissenting at the risk of retaliation and ostracization from coaches and teammates.

You may be aware that the Supreme Court recently held in *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* that a high school football coach’s silent, private post-game prayer was constitutional. 142 S.Ct. 2407, 2415–16 (2022). Throughout its opinion, the Court repeatedly stressed that the coach silently prayed alone. *Id.* (the coach “offered his prayers quietly while his students were otherwise occupied.”). The prayers “were not publicly broadcast or recited to a captive audience. Students were not required or expected to participate.” *Id.* at 2432. Here, rather than praying privately after games, the team’s coaches have infused religion into the football program, allowing Pastor Few to preach to the team and coerce 20 public school students to be baptized.

“The preservation and transmission of religious beliefs and worship is a responsibility and a choice **committed to the private sphere.**” *Santa Fe*, 530 U.S. 290 at 310 (quoting *Lee*, 505 U.S. 577 at 589 (emphasis added)). The religious coercion occurring within the District’s football program is a flagrant usurpation of parental rights for those parents and students who are not Christians or do not subscribe to any religion. This “[s]chool sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible because it sends the ancillary message to . . . nonadherents ‘that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.’” *Id.* at 309–10 (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring)). Thirty-seven percent of the American population is non-Christian, including the almost 30 percent<sup>1</sup> who are nonreligious. At least a third of Generation Z (those born after 1996) have no religion<sup>2</sup>, with a recent survey revealing almost half of Gen Z qualify as “nones” (religiously unaffiliated).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory A. Smith, *About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated*, Pew Research Center (Dec. 14, 2021), [www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/](http://www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/).

<sup>2</sup> Samuel J. Abrams, *Perspective: Why even secular people should worry about Gen Z’s lack of faith*, Deseret News (Mar. 4, 2023), [www.deseret.com/2023/3/4/23617175/gen-z-faith-religious-nones-civic-life-volunteers-charity](http://www.deseret.com/2023/3/4/23617175/gen-z-faith-religious-nones-civic-life-volunteers-charity)

<sup>3</sup> 2022 Cooperative Election Study of 60,000 respondents, analyzed by Ryan P. Burge [www.religioninpublic.blog/2023/04/03/gen-z-and-religion-in-2022/](http://www.religioninpublic.blog/2023/04/03/gen-z-and-religion-in-2022/).

We ask that the District investigate this matter and take immediate action to protect its students. The team's coaches must be directed to cease allowing a pastor to proselytize and baptize student athletes. We further request that all District coaches be reminded that they may not push their personal religious beliefs onto students while acting in their official capacity, nor enlist an outside adult to do the same. Please inform us in writing of the steps the District is taking to remedy this serious constitutional violation. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Chris Line", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Christopher Line  
Staff Attorney  
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure



Tattnall County Football · Follow  
Public



Yesterday after practice Coach Ferrell gave the guys the opportunity to be baptized by Pastor Few. 20 young men made the decision to go #ALLIN with Christ!! Show them some support💛💙  
#BiggerThanFootball See less