



# CONGRESSIONAL PRAYER CAUCUS FOUNDATION

October 3, 2019

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Congressman Joe Wilson  
Congressman Robert Wittman

Dr. Bryan Thomsen, Superintendent  
Oak Grove R-VI School District  
601 SE 12th Street  
Oak Grove, MO 64057

Dear Superintendent Thomsen:

I have the honor of serving as the Executive Director of the Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation. The Foundation serves nearly 100 members of Congress who are part of the Congressional Prayer Caucus (the names of those members of Congress who serve on the Congressional Prayer Advisory Team are listed on the left).

In addition, the Foundation serves Legislative Prayer Caucuses in 38 states, including Missouri, which have over 1,000 state senators and state representatives as members. These leaders are working together to preserve the integrity of our Founding Principles and protect First Amendment rights for all.

We recently learned from news reports that the Freedom From Religion Foundation ("FFRF") sent a letter to you alleging that certain practices at your school (prayer before faculty meetings, Bible verses on bulletin boards, distributing flyers and perhaps religious materials) violate the Constitution. Although we have not seen FFRF's letter or know anything about the allegations other than what appeared on a news site (<https://fox4kc.com/2019/09/23/organization-alleges-oak-grove-district-violating-constitutional-rights-with-prayer-in-schools/>), we thought it worthwhile to write you this short letter of encouragement.

Members of the Congressional Prayer Caucus and the Missouri Prayer Caucus are obviously people of faith. Given the allegations in FFRF's letter, we assume that some of your faculty, staff, and students are also people of faith. These people of faith do not lose their First Amendment right to the free exercise of their religion when they enter school property. Faculty and staff members of faith are not required to say "amen" to their last prayer for the work day as they enter the school building. Students

can continue the time-honored tradition of praying before a test. Given the influence that teachers can have over individual students, however, the courts have imposed certain restrictions on the observance of religion in public schools.

Because of confusion in this area, Congress in 2001 amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and required the Secretary of Education to issue guidance on constitutionally protected prayer in public elementary and secondary schools. The Secretary complied with this requirement in a 2003 document entitled "Guidance on Constitutionally Protected Prayer in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools." This document remains on the Department of Education website, and can be found at [https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/religionandschools/prayer\\_guidance.html](https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/religionandschools/prayer_guidance.html).

We encourage you to read it to understand your faculty's and staff's rights and responsibilities regarding religion in your school.

Thank you for the time you have given to reading this letter and the DOE guidance. We ask that you consider the following words of the U.S. Supreme Court in *Zorach v. Clauson*, 343 U.S. 306, 314 (1952), where the Court stated: "[W]e find no constitutional requirement which makes it necessary for government to be hostile to religion and to throw its weight against efforts to widen the effective scope of religious influence."

If we can be of any further service to you on this issue, feel free to contact us. We have First Amendment lawyers on staff who will work with you without charge if you need their services.

Sincerely,



Lea Carawan

Executive Director

Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation

National Strategic Center