

Naperville Central coach told he can't lead players in prayer



Wisconsin-based Freedom From Religion Foundation received a complaint from a local member about Naperville Central High School football coaches apparently leading students in prayer at a Nov. 14 game. Courtesy of David K. Neesley, Dk Digital Photography

Two days after receiving a letter from a group that represents atheists and seeks to defend the separation of church and state, Naperville Unit District 203 officials have told Naperville Central High School head football coach Mike Stine that he cannot lead his players in prayer.

The complaint was filed after some players and coaches were seen praying before their Nov. 14 playoff loss to Waubonsie Valley in Aurora.

Superintendent Dan Bridges reviewed the complaint and "determined that a voluntary prayer intended as a moment of reflection was offered," according to a statement released Thursday by a district spokeswoman.

"We are aware that a coach-led prayer is not appropriate," the statement read. "The head football coach has been instructed that neither he nor his staff may lead his players in prayer. This message has been communicated to the athletic directors at both high schools to ensure that this expectation is shared with coaches of all sports at all levels."

The Freedom From Religion Foundation was contacted by a local member of the Madison, Wisconsin-based nonprofit organization about Naperville Central personnel, including Stine, praying with student-athletes at football games. The foundation also sent pictures taken by Naperville photographer David Neesley that apparently show coaches praying with players on bended knee at the Nov. 14 game, a 17-0 loss for the Redhawks.

Stine did not immediately return phone messages Thursday.

While the foundation credited district officials for a "prompt investigation and response," attorney Ryan Jayne said in a letter Thursday their assurances do "not go far enough."

Courts have held that public school employees are prohibited not just from leading students in religious activities but also from participating, Jayne argued.

"Students are welcome to pray on their own, but school representatives must not participate," he wrote.

Students voluntarily praying on their own without coercion passes muster, said Harold Krent, dean and professor at the Chicago-Kent College of Law.

But if a coach "just does his sort of prayer thing quietly at the same time" -- that's a murkier case, Krent said.

To consider whether the First Amendment's Establishment Clause was violated, he would ask questions such as did the coach create a special time or structure to facilitate prayer?

"That's why it's really fact-specific," he said.

The foundation asked the district to give follow-up instructions to its athletic directors to "clarify that coaches may not appear to endorse religion by participating in student religious activities." The group also asked for a written response from the district.

In a Dec. 8 letter to Bridges, the foundation urged the district to launch an investigation into the complaint and "take immediate action to stop any and all prayers occurring within any district athletic programs," Jayne wrote.

Jayne cited Supreme Court cases that have struck down school-sponsored prayer in public schools as violations of the First Amendment.

"Federal courts have consistently held that public school coaches represent the school during practices and games, and therefore they cannot participate in prayer with students," Jayne said in a phone interview.

The group counts roughly 23,000 members, Jayne said.

"We rely mostly on them to be our eyes and ears for these sorts of issues," he said.

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Naperville football players back coach, vow to continue team prayer

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Representatives of a Wisconsin-based organization filed a complaint with Naperville District 203 this week after seeing this photo and others that show football players praying before a game. (Courtesy of David Neesley)

[Bill BirdContact Reporter](#)

Naperville Sun

Members of the Naperville Central High School football team are rallying to the defense of coach Michael Stine and vow to continue praying before games after a private group called for the school district to put a stop to the practice, a member of the team said Friday.

Redhawks player Daniel Bumpus issued a statement he said had been approved by his teammates. It called Stine "a role model" and tweaked members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation in Madison, Wis., who brought the issue to light.

"The players will continue this tradition of praying before our games, and would like to extend an invitation to all members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, to come out next fall and watch us pray and play the game we love," according to the letter that was signed by The Naperville Central Redhawk Football Team.

Naperville District 203 Superintendent Dan Bridges issued a statement Thursday putting an end to staff-led team prayers and similar religious observances at all Naperville Central High School and Naperville North High School student athletic events.

"We, as a football team and a family, give Coach Stine our full support," said Bumpus, 18, who also identified himself as an officer of the National Honor Society's Naperville Central chapter. Stine "is the best coach in the state, and cares about each and every one of us more than any other coach cares about his players."

District spokeswoman Michelle Fregoso on Friday said officials have heard from parents, students and members of the community on the issue.

"As you can imagine, the comments range from supportive and understanding to not so supportive and understanding," Fregoso said.

Freedom From Religion Foundation attorney Ryan Jayne responded Friday with a statement from Annie Laurie Gaylor, the group's co-president.

The Redhawks players "are coming to the defense of inappropriate religious conduct by a school authority figure — in this case, the coach who makes or breaks their athletic experience," Gaylor said in the statement.

"It's not the fault of these students that they do not understand the legal principle being violated when a coach leads, encourages or participates in prayer with student players. That was the job of Naperville Central High School, and it has failed abysmally.

"Public schools exist to educate, not indoctrinate," Gaylor's statement continued. "Public school athletes should not be coached to 'pray and play the game we love,' as the players put it in their statement."

Gaylor cited a 1910 Illinois Supreme Court ruling that banned study of the Bible in public schools, and similar, subsequent cases.

Naperville resident Hemant Mehta brought the matter to the attention of foundation members. Mehta writes a blog called FriendlyAtheist.com.

Readers "send me story tips all the time, including legal problems happening in their neck of the woods, hoping I can boost the coverage on a larger scale," Mehta said Friday via email.



Representatives of a Wisconsin-based organization filed a complaint with Naperville District 203 this week after seeing this photo and others that they believe show football players praying before a game. (David Neesley / Handout)

One of those readers passed along the pictures of the team praying.

"I knew this was a problem, since coaches aren't supposed to join students in prayer ... so I forwarded the images" to the foundation, Mehta said. "It was a little strange because this was happening so close to home, and I'm not used to seeing legal problems like this in our area."

Foundation members on Tuesday sent a letter to Bridges after being directed to the photos, which featured Naperville Central players kneeling in prayer before their Nov. 14 game against Waubonsie Valley High School. Stine and other coaches also were depicted in the photos.

The pictures were taken by Naperville-area photographer David Neesley, who said he is a Naperville Central graduate and has no professional affiliation with District 203 or the Freedom From Religion Foundation. He said he did not bring the photos to the foundation's attention.

Bridges on Thursday agreed to ban "team prayers" and similar religious observances at all Naperville Central and Naperville North student athletic events.

In his letter to the foundation, Bridges conceded that "a voluntary prayer intended as a moment of reflection was offered" before the game in question.

Jayne on Thursday wrote back to Bridges, saying the ban "does not go far enough" in keeping religious rituals out of district-sponsored or sanctioned events.

In the original letter, Jayne cited the Equal Access Act, which he said "permits teachers to be present at student religious activities 'only in a nonparticipatory capacity.' This restriction ensures that the school does not illegally endorse students' religious activities" or give the appearance of favoring or endorsing one religion over another, he wrote.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation claims 23,000 members across the U.S. Its purpose "is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between church and state," according to Jayne.

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