

August 30, 2012

Mr. Andrew L. Seidel
Freedom From Religion Foundation
P. O. Box 750
Madison, WI 53701

Dear Mr. Seidel:

This is in response to your correspondence dated August 21, 2012, and your subsequent correspondence dated August 27, 2012, regarding alleged First Amendment violations by Mr. Mark Mariakis, who is the Head Football Coach at Ridgeland High School. Let me assure you that the Walker County School System is concerned that each person within the system (student and employee) is afforded his or her constitutional rights.

As you allude in your correspondence, the Walker County School System is a partially federally funded institution of public education. The System serves an ethnically diverse population and is cognizant of the scope and parameters of the First Amendment and the Establishment Clause. The System always strives to stay compliant with the law.

On behalf of the Walker County School System, your complaints are taken very seriously, and each enumerated complaint stated in your correspondence has been carefully reviewed.

Generally, we disagree with your portrayal of some of the events and facts as set forth in your correspondence. For instance, it appears your correspondence has put together bits and pieces of articles, quotes and occurrences out of context which gives an inaccurate picture of what actually has or has not taken place. For instance, the quotes you attribute to the former RHS graduate were not recent and were not in response to the complaints you allege in your correspondence. Additionally, it appears that some of the allegations in your letter are inaccurate. For instance, no basis could be found to support your statement that Coach Mariakis made fun of the Mormon religion or any religion.

The System understands that no player or team member of any sport may be “preached to” while participating in a sport. Players and coaches are provided pre-game meals by organizations both secular and religious, and these meals are provided at churches and other venues such as public restaurants. During these pre-game meals there will be no religious references.

While System employees may not be involved in prayer at school-sponsored activities or during school hours, student prayer or student-led prayer is permissible as long as it does not disrupt educational time and is not conducted during an impermissible time. Our review of this matter did not find any basis for your contention that Coach Mariakis has led or been active any in pre-game or after-game prayers. Any pre-game or post-game prayers will not be led by, organized by or participated in by any System employee or anyone other than students.

There is no practice by Coach Mariakis of using Bible verses on team apparel.

FCA is a non-curricular club, and at RHS, the meetings are voluntary and student initiated. Coach Mariakis attends these meetings in a non-participating role, and there is no regular involvement of non-school personnel, either leading or attending the meetings. Participation of System employees in religious activities outside their scope of responsibility as an educator, not on school time, at a school function or on school property is not prohibited.

There is no basis for your contention that any student is pressured to attend a Christian football camp or that Coach Mariakis sends any of his players to a Christian football camp. That has not been the practice in the past nor will it be the practice of Coach Mariakis in the future. The RHS football team will not have a “team chaplain” that leads the football team in prayers, but again, student initiated and student led prayers are not prohibited by law.

As to your reference to an outpouring of support for the Walker County System “including a number of Facebook pages that confirm some of our original allegations and point out additional constitutional violations”, seldom do Facebook postings or blog entries present a complete or totally accurate account of any event or issue due to personal opinion and interpretation associated with such social media. On the other hand, the outpouring of support appears to be indicative of the excellent football program headed by Coach Mariakis and all the hard work of excellent employees of the Walker County School System.

I trust the above is responsive to your concerns and complaints. The Walker County System will in the future, as in the past, work tirelessly to provide a quality education for all of its students in all programs, both athletic and academic, in an atmosphere that respects the rights of all of its students and employees.

Sincerely,

Damon Raines

Superintendent, Walker County School System