



**Press Release**  
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## **First Liberty Institute Demands Illinois School Adopt Policy Protecting Student Religious Speech**

*Recent High School Valedictorian Prevented from Referencing Faith During  
Graduation Ceremony Seeks Apology*

**Colchester, Illinois**—First Liberty Institute today sent a letter to the West Prairie School District demanding that it adopt policies protecting the First Amendment rights of students after school officials forced a student, Sam Blackledge, to alter his valedictory speech to remove any reference to his religious viewpoint. The letter also asks the school to apologize to Blackledge, a 2018 graduate of West Prairie High School.

“It’s too late for Sam’s only high school graduation ceremony, but he still deserves an apology,” said Jeremy Dys, Deputy General Counsel for First Liberty Institute. “Now, we must protect future students who wish to reference their religious beliefs in a speech to their classmates.”

In its letter to school officials, First Liberty explains that the First Amendment protects the personal remarks of graduates. It concludes by asking school officials to acknowledge the wrongdoing and to set up a meeting with school officials and First Liberty Institute attorneys to help facilitate a way to protect the religious expression of students in the future without resorting to the courts.

You can read the demand letter, [here](#).

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### **About First Liberty Institute**

[First Liberty Institute](#) is the largest legal organization in the nation dedicated exclusively to defending religious freedom for all Americans.

To arrange an interview, contact Lacey McNiel at [media@firstliberty.org](mailto:media@firstliberty.org) or by calling 972-941-4453.