



News Release
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Illinois School Adopts Policy Protecting Student Religious Speech During Graduation Ceremonies

School District Officials Clarified Policies After Preventing High School Valedictorian, Sam Blackledge, from Sharing His Beliefs During May Graduation

Colchester, Illinois—First Liberty Institute today announced that the West Prairie (IL) Community School District 103 adopted policies protecting the First Amendment rights of students who participate in graduation ceremonies. In May, a student, Sam Blackledge, had to alter his valedictory speech and was prohibited from sharing his faith in the way he had planned. The new policies were approved last night by the West Prairie School Board.

“West Prairie’s new policies ensure that students are free to express their faith at school as long as it’s not disruptive,” said Roger Byron, Senior Counsel for First Liberty Institute. “We, along with our client, are very pleased that West Prairie school officials clarified this important policy that will permit future students to share their faith in a graduation ceremony. We appreciate the school district’s deep commitment to upholding the Constitution.”

In May, Blackledge, a 2018 graduate of West Prairie High School, was told prior to his graduation that he could not share his faith in his valedictory speech in the way he had planned. In a letter to school officials, First Liberty explained that the First Amendment protects the personal remarks of graduates. School officials worked with the attorneys at First Liberty Institute to craft a clarification to their policies in order to protect the religious expression of students in the future.

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About First Liberty Institute

[First Liberty Institute](http://www.firstliberty.org) 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 or by calling 972-941-4453.