

Religion in public schools disputed in one of U.S.'s fastest-growing cities

The school superintendent's prayer during a mandatory meeting sparked tensions in McKinney, Texas.

by [Bobby Ross Jr.](#) in the [March 28, 2018](#) issue



Rick McDaniel (center), superintendent of public schools in McKinney, Texas, prays at a mandatory employee meeting at Prestonwood Baptist Church in nearby Plano, Texas, in August 2017. Screenshot via McKinney Schools video.

Public school officials in one of the nation's fastest-growing cities are being accused of violating the separation of church and state.

The controversy has been simmering in McKinney, Texas, once a tiny cotton-farming community, about 30 miles north of Dallas, since last summer when Rick McDaniel, superintendent of the McKinney Independent School District, prayed at a pulpit adorned with a Christian cross during a mandatory school employee meeting at a church.

Recently, under pressure from concerned parents, the 24,500-student school district decided to end a decade-plus practice of conducting high school commencement ceremonies at the same church, Prestonwood Baptist, a Southern Baptist megachurch in nearby Plano.

The change outraged Prestonwood pastor Jack Graham, one of President Trump's evangelical advisers and a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

"It was our refusal to remove the cross from view that created this cowardly decision," Graham wrote on social media.

The pastor alleged that school administrators had "yielded to the pressure of atheist groups and their supporters."

McDaniel's prayer drew the ire of the Wisconsin-based Freedom from Religion Foundation, which requested that the school "temporarily cover iconography" to keep graduation ceremonies secular.

Its copresident, Annie Laurie Gaylor, released a statement after the school district's decision: "We are pleased that the school has moved its graduation to a secular location rather than attempt to modify a house of worship into a place that appears secular. The district's decision to change its tradition to protect its students' rights of conscience is anything but cowardly."

Across the nation, church-state clashes like the one in McKinney have become more common, said Charles Haynes, coauthor of *Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools*.

"As we grow more religiously diverse in the United States and people are more visible from various religious groups that have long been here but have not been visible, we are being called in these communities to live up to the First Amendment for the first time in many cases," Haynes said.

In his assessment, if a cross or crosses were visible during a public graduation ceremony, that wouldn't necessarily be unconstitutional. But the church can't require a cross to be visible, nor require students to listen to a pastor.

"Religious freedom isn't a local church putting conditions on a public school using its facility and making sure its cross is visible," Haynes said. "That's the opposite of religious freedom, and that's exactly what the First Amendment is intended to

prohibit.”

School district spokesman Cody Cunningham said in a statement that there were “a variety of reasons, including proximity, availability, attendance capacity, and convenience” for moving the graduation events to the secular Allen Event Center in a neighboring suburb.

“Parents and community members have expressed opposing views on the appropriateness of holding graduations in a religious facility,” Cunningham said. “More recently, the public debate over the venue intensified to a level that would likely have caused a distraction at the commencement ceremonies.”

Just since 2000, McKinney has more than tripled in size, hitting an estimated population of nearly 180,000. Last year, it ranked as the third-fastest growing city in the United States among communities with populations of 50,000 or more, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Seven years ago, in search of a community friendly to his Christian values, James Blanchet moved his family from Southern California to McKinney. But the software sales professional said he has no problem with moving McKinney’s commencement ceremonies to a secular location.

“If they wanted to hold the graduation at a non-Christian place of worship, I wouldn’t feel comfortable with that,” he said. “I do see both sides of it. So, in the scheme of things, is it a big deal? No. You’ve got to pick your battles.”

McKinney school officials declined to comment on the controversy, and the district spokesman would not discuss reports of an intolerant environment in the schools.

Two McKinney public middle school teachers resigned in January after they posted antigay and anti-Islamic social media messages. In messages found on Twitter the teachers referred to Islam as a “satanic death cult,” an “evil ideology,” and a “political ideology . . . [that] cannot assimilate,” according to the Dallas-Fort Worth chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

At a meeting last month, Farah Uddin, a Muslim mother, urged the school board to accept diversity training offered by groups including CAIR and the Gay and Lesbian Alliance of North Texas. Uddin noted that the McKinney Independent School District’s “Vision, Mission and Beliefs” statement says, “Everyone has an inherent

value and deserves to be treated with dignity and respect.”

“But with recent developments, I feel we are not following this belief,” Uddin told the board. “Some students have recently come out and reported that teachers within the ISD have been engaging in racist and discriminatory behaviors toward certain students in the classroom. As a result, these students are hiding their identity out of the fear of being bullied because of their race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation.”

Kate Parker, a mother of two McKinney students who describes herself as agnostic, said too often teachers have placed Christian crosses and Bible verses on school walls, prayed aloud in classrooms, and made comments such as, “The answer to all your big questions is God.”

The former public school art teacher has helped organize an informal interfaith group of parents, including Christians, Jews, Muslims, atheists, and agnostics. The group has pressed the school board for more inclusivity and sensitivity toward students of all faiths or no faith.

“It’s about making sure every kid . . . feels comfortable and included at school,” Parker said. “Obviously, the focus has a lot to do with separating church and state and making sure that McKinney ISD is in compliance with the law.”

However, some worry that something is lost with relocating the commencement ceremonies away from the church. Heather Harrison, who has attended graduation for two nieces and a nephew at Prestonwood Baptist, feels that “it’s another step to moving everything toward [a] more secular” approach.

“I know Texas is a popular place; people move here from all different backgrounds,” she said. “I see where people could have an issue with it if you weren’t a Christian. . . . But it makes me sad.” —Religion News Service