

High School Backed Down After Student Stood Up for the Freedom to Pray

Chase Windebank was called into the principal's office for praying with his friends during free time. ADF sued the school district to protect his rights.



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No student wants to get called into the principal's office. Getting reprimanded for your misbehavior is never pleasant. But what if you're being scolded for praying on campus during your free time?

That may sound like a far-fetched scenario, but it's exactly what happened to Chase Windebank as a senior at Pine Creek High School in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Chase had been using a free period to meet with other Christian students for a time of prayer. According to the principal, that violated the "separation of church and state."

Of course, no constitutional principle requires schools to forbid prayer by students, especially during their free time. In fact, the opposite is true: the First Amendment requires that public schools respect students' free speech and religious expression.

So Alliance Defending Freedom stepped in.

Small beginnings, widening influence

At Pine Creek High School, students may be excused from the homeroom period on Mondays and Wednesdays for "Open Time" during which they may hang out in the cafeteria, meet up with clubs and groups, or go outside. In addition, students who meet a certain GPA threshold may be excused from homeroom on Fridays.

During his freshman year at Pine Creek, Chase decided to use his free time to meet with some friends in a quiet area to pray, sing Christian songs, and discuss the issues of the day from a religious perspective.

Chase and his group continued to meet weekly for the next three school years. And the group grew. On one Monday in September during Chase's senior year, roughly 90 students joined together to sing, pray, and talk.

But something else happened that Monday. An assistant principal called Chase into his office and told him that religious speech during the homeroom period would have to stop due to the "separation of church and state." Chase and his group would have to meet either before or after school.

No other students or groups of students were subjected to limitations on their speech during their "Open Time." Chase was singled out for his religious expression. So he contacted ADF.

Challenging the school district

School district officials hadn't just inconvenienced Chase; they had violated several of his rights. Here are three:

- **Freedom of speech:** By restricting Chase's speech based on its religious nature, while permitting other students to engage in non-religious speech during the same time period, district officials were engaging in content and viewpoint discrimination—an unconstitutional practice prohibited by the First Amendment's right to free speech.
- **Freedom of association:** The actions of district officials deterred and restricted Chase and his group of Christian friends from gathering together during the same time that other students were permitted to do so.
- **Free exercise of religion:** Chase's group engaged in religious activity through prayer and worship. But their religious exercise was targeted for cancellation by school officials, who permitted other students to engage in non-religious activities. That violates Chase and the other students' right to freely exercise their religion.

ADF filed a lawsuit in federal court on Chase's behalf, and thankfully, the school district responded by agreeing to drop its ban on student religious discussion and expression. Following the district's response, ADF attorneys agreed to settle the case. While the school district unfortunately opted to cancel the free period for the next school year,

the settlement meant that students could speak and pray freely during free times like lunch.

From the principal's office to the Oval Office

As a result of Chase's lawsuit, the school district stated in a court filing that Chase "and his fellow students are welcome to sit together in the cafeteria during lunch ... to pray and discuss topics of religious interest"—a complete reversal of the district's previous statements.

But Chase's stand led to another result as well.

In 2020, President Donald Trump invited Chase to the Oval Office to tell his story. There, the president announced several new measures to protect the religious freedom of students on American campuses. Part of the president's guidance directed public schools to respect students' free speech and free exercise of constitutionally protected rights.

Because of Chase's courageous stand, the students attending his high school now—and in high schools across the country—can join together and pray during the school day without fearing punishment and unequal treatment thanks to him.

And to Chase, that makes it all worth it.

Windebank v. Academy School District #20

- **November 2014:** ADF attorneys [filed a lawsuit](#) against Chase Windebank's school district.
- **June 2015:** After the school district agreed to drop its ban on student religious expression, ADF attorneys [agreed to settle the lawsuit](#).

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