

My name is Ron Russell. I have been a coach and educator for the last 27 years in the Wichita area. I'm writing today to share an experience I had in 2017.

I am an assistant wrestling coach for Wichita Northwest High School. We were holding our end of the year banquet and were preparing to eat dinner. A few of the athletes asked me to say grace before the meal. I said a very brief prayer, something along the lines of "Heavenly Father, please bless this meal and thank you for the wonderful season that you blessed us with. Amen." The meal went on as planned and the night had no other issues.

Nearly 6 weeks passed and I was called into the principal's office to speak with our head of Human Resources. He asked me if I prayed at the wrestling banquet. It was such a brief and minor issue that I hesitated before answering, but then remembered that I had. I told him yes and explained the circumstances behind it. He asked me to not do it again. Then our principal discussed the issue with me and told me if I lead another prayer with a school related team that I would be removed from all coaching activities and my teaching position would also be in jeopardy. I agreed to not do it again. They also showed me the letter they received complaining about the prayer from some atheist group out of Ohio.

The letter also complained that they thought I had lead prayers during Cross Country season as well. I have not led prayers but allow student lead prayers during practices and meets.

Also, at the Greater Wichita Athletic League Track Championship FCA announced a voluntary prayer and invited people to join. We were immediately told we shouldn't make an announcement and we weren't allowed to do it again. There is a student led prayer at City League Cross Country Championship every year, but we aren't allowed to announce it using the district email.

I understand the separation of Church and State and I actually support that separation when it comes to religious persecution and harassment. But I think a moment of quiet reflection does not fit in that category.

Ron Russell