

**Prayer at Interscholastic Athletic Events in the United States: A Regional Analysis**

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The issue of prayer being led at public high school athletic events has been one that is highly controversial and hotly debated. However, from a legal standpoint, the Supreme Court provided some clarification in their ruling in the case of Santa Fe Independent School District (TX) v. Doe (2000) in terms of what practices fall within the bounds of constitutionality and those practices that would be considered unconstitutional. The court confirmed the right of any student to pray before, during, and after athletic events. Furthermore, any student-athlete can kneel and pray in the locker rooms or on the field.

Concerning spectators, anyone in the viewing stands can pray or organize an impromptu prayer session with others around them. On the other hand, the court clearly stated that "school sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible because it sends the ancillary message to members of the audience who are non-adherents that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, [i.e.] favored members of the political community." In practical terms, the court made it clear that school administrators or representatives (e.g. Coaches, Athletic Directors, and School Administrators) cannot take any action to organize or promote formal prayer at athletic events. Actual prayer practices at high school athletic contests have not been examined on a nationwide basis; however, an earlier preliminary study (Gillentine, Goldfine, Phillips, Seidler, and Scott, 2002) discovered that illegal, school-official-led prayer occurs regularly at interscholastic sporting events in the Southeastern United States.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the following major research questions: (1) How prevalent are religious activities (prayer, moment of silence, or no religious activity) at public high school sporting events and does the presence of pre-game religious activities differ by geographical region (West, South, Midwest, etc.) of the United States as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau; (2) Which sports are more likely to have pre-game religious activities and (3) What is the prevalence and nature of written policies regarding religious activities (e.g. the nature of the limitations concerning who is restricted from leading prayers, and who authored these policies).

The selection of Athletic Directors was conducted on a random basis, stratified on two variables, regions of the country and size of the high schools, to assure that all regions and sizes of schools were represented in the results. From a sample size of 2395, 585 athletic directors responded, resulting in a 24% response rate. The distinguishing demographic characteristics of the Athletic Directors in the data set were that these individuals were primarily white males (>90%), two-thirds of which were between the ages of 36-55, and that most (72.5%) held advanced degrees (master's degrees plus additional credit hours). Concerning experience as Athletic Directors, 43.9% had worked in this capacity for five or fewer years, 37.1% for six to 15 years, and 19% for more than 15 years; and, 56.8% were currently also serving as a coach.

The Prayer and High School Athletic Events Survey (PAES) was developed to be administered to athletic directors by Goldfine, Seidler and Gillentine (2002). Beyond demographic questions the PAES contained questions regarding the following: 1) the types of pre-game religion activities (prayer, invocation, etc.); 2) who leads the pre-game religious activities; 3) who determined the pre-game religious activity policies; and, 4) when the policies were adopted. Furthermore, but not reported in the present proposal the PAES assesses private and public religious values.

Regarding the primary research question of prevalence of prayer at high school sporting events in the various regions of the country, the data was analyzed using a chi-square test of independence with region and pre-game religious activity as factors. The purpose of this analysis was to ascertain whether statistically significant differences between regions in pre-game religious activities exist. On a regional basis, Athletic Directors reported that their teams engaged in pre-game prayer with the following results: 12.7% in the Northeast; 24.5% in the Midwest; 50% in the South and; 23.2% in the West. The chi-square analysis was statistically significant,  $X^2 = 54.31$ ,  $p < .001$ , and Cramer's  $V = .30$ . The chi-square for presence of a moment of silence was non-significant,  $X^2 = 7.24$ ,  $p = .06$ , and Cramer's  $V = .11$ . The mean percentage of schools engaging in a moment of silence was 29.4%. When Athletic Directors reported no religious activity, the pattern changed with 52.9% in the Northeast, 50.3% in

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the Midwest, 22% in the South and 49.3% in the West reporting their teams engaged in no religious activity,  $X^2 = 44.11$ ,  $p < .001$ , and Cramer's  $V = .27$ .

When considering the secondary research questions, i.e., the degree to which different sports had pre-game religious activities and the prevalence of policies relative to prayer restriction, the data were analyzed descriptively. Concerning which sports are more likely to have pre-game religious activities (football, basketball, volleyball, baseball, or softball), the results were clear that football is the most likely sport to have a pre-game prayer (40.3%) followed by basketball (5.1%) while the other sports rarely had prayer ( $< 1\%$ ). Relative to schools reporting that they have a written prayer policy, only 19.3% across all regions had such policies. In general, these policies were established by the school boards (79.2%) followed by superintendents (5.7%), school lawyers (3.4%) and the remainder were established by coaches and athletic directors. Of the established policies, 6% placed no restrictions on who could lead a prayer.

The results of the study suggest that regional differences are present with the largest percentage of schools participating in pre-game prayer located in the South (50%). The pattern reverses with regions other than the South in regards to not engaging in religious activities at sporting events. Football is more likely to have prayer when prayer is present. Some of this could be due to the dangers associated with the game.

Lastly, written prayer policies are not prevalent with 80.3% of athletic directors reporting no policy. However, when policies were established, they tended to be written by school boards and prohibit school officials from leading prayer. Is there a separation of church and state? With the lack of established policy in our high schools and the religious diversity in the U.S., lawsuits may be on the rise, especially in the South.