# RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION AT SCHOOL BOARD MEETINGS 2.223

The opening of deliberative public bodies with prayer is deeply embedded in the history and traditions of this country. It is the intent of the Sarasota County School Board to solemnize the proceedings of School Board Meetings by allowing for an invocation to be delivered at the beginning of each business meeting. The purpose of the invocation is to assist Board Members in setting their minds to a higher purpose and to ease their task of governing the school district. The invocation, which may include a prayer, short solemnizing message, or moment of silence, will be offered only at meetings where the Board sits as a local legislative body. This is not intended, and shall not be construed in any way, to affiliate the Board with, show allegiance to, or preference for any particular religion, denomination, faith, creed, or belief system. The purpose of this policy is to establish a fair and neutral process for such invocations in compliance with applicable law. Because the purpose of invocations is for the benefit of the School Board prior to conducting the business of the School Board and the School Board maintains control over the message conveyed in the invocation by controlling the selection process through this policy, the School Board designates invocations as government speech.

## I. Invocation and Participation

a. Each regular meeting of the School Board shall begin with an opening invocation of up to two (2) minutes in length.

b. Participation in the invocation shall be voluntary. No member of the Board, District staff, student, or member of the public shall be required or will be pressured to participate, bow heads, stand, or otherwise engage in the invocation. Any such decision to participate or not participate shall have no impact on the ability of the person to actively participate in the business of the School Board.

c. Neither any School Board member, nor the Superintendent shall deliver the invocation. The invocation will be delivered prior to the Pledge of Allegiance at the start of the meeting. Although the invocation shall be listed in the regular meeting agenda, it shall not be considered an agenda item for the meeting or part of the Board's public business.

## II. Neutrality

a. The School Board shall not endorse, approve, or disapprove the content of any invocation. Nor shall the School Board use the opportunity for an invocation to proselytize for, advance any one, or disparage any faith. The School Board shall not discriminate against any particular faith or religious belief or approach.

b. The invocation shall not reflect an official position of the Board, District, or its employees.

c. The opportunity to deliver an invocation is open to speakers of all faith

traditions, as well as those offering a secular or non-religious message of inspiration.

## III. Selection of Speakers

a. The Office of the School Board shall compile and maintain a database of local religious congregations, community organizations, and civic groups within Sarasota County. This database shall include names, address, email address, and phone number of religious leaders and assemblies.

   i. The Invocation Speaker Database is to be used for the purposes of logistics, efficiency, and equal opportunity for all of Sarasota County's spiritual leaders and assemblies, who may themselves choose whether to respond to the School Board's invitation to deliver an invocation.

   ii. Initial creation of this list can be done by utilizing lists of invocation speakers already compiled by other local legislative bodies, as well as those of local fire departments, law enforcement agencies, or military units.

   iii. This database shall be reviewed and updated annually.

b. Any spiritual leader or assembly that operates in Sarasota County or that serves Sarasota County residents may submit a written request to the Office of the School Board to be included in the Invocation Speaker Database.

c. Should a question arise as to whether a spiritual leader or assembly operates within or serves the residents of Sarasota County, the School Board Chair or School Board Attorney may refer to resources including the Florida Division of Corporations and criteria used by the Internal Revenue Service ("I.R.S.") in its determination of those organizations that would legitimately qualify for I.R.C. § 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status or other I.R.S. tax-exempt status.

d. To ensure that a diverse group of individuals and assemblies deliver the invocation on a random, rotating basis, with no individual or organization given preference or advantage over another, a lottery system will be used. Each month, the School Board Chair or designee will draw three (3) individuals or assemblies from the existing Invocation Speaker Database using randomizing software. The first individual or assembly drawn from the Invocation Speaker Database will then be mailed or emailed an invitation. If the invited individual or assembly declines this invitation in writing or fails to respond to the invitation within five (5) business days from the date of the letter, the next individual or assembly randomly drawn from the Invocation Speaker Database will be invited to deliver the invocation in the same manner described above until the invitation is accepted.

e. An Invocation Speaker will be removed from the random selection process for a period of one year after delivering their invocation prior to a School Board Meeting.

## IV. Delivery and Rules of the Invocation

a. No Invocation Speaker shall receive compensation for delivering the invocation.

b. No guidelines or limitations shall be issued regarding an invocation's content except that no invocation should proselytize any faith or disparage the religious faith or non-religious views of others. No member or employee of the School Board shall engage in any prior inquiry, review of, or involvement in, the content of any invocation offered by the Invocation Speaker.

c. Should the scheduled Invocation Speaker not appear at the appointed time to deliver the invocation, the School Board Chair will proceed with the pledge of allegiance and no invocation will be delivered.

d. Neither the Board nor its employees will interrupt the invocation or dismiss the Invocation Speaker based on the content of the invocation.

**STATUTORY AUTHORITY:**

**1001.41, 1001.43(10), F.S.**

**683.1455, 1000.06, 1002.20, 1003.421, 1003.44, 1003.4505, 1003.42(2)(2)-(c), F.S.**
**20 U.S.C. 4071 et seq.**

**HISTORY:**

**ADOPTED:**
**REVISION DATE(S):**
**FORMERLY:**

**NOTES:**