



Security fencing surrounds the U.S. Supreme Court building, Monday, June 27, 2022, in Washington. (AP Photo/Patrick Semansky)

Jessica Gresko

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Washington — June 27, 2022

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The Supreme Court on June 27 sided with a football coach from Washington state who sought to kneel and pray on the field after games.

The court [ruled 6-3](#) for the coach with the court's conservative justices in the majority and its liberals in dissent. The justices said the coach's prayer was protected by the First Amendment.

"The Constitution and the best of our traditions counsel mutual respect and tolerance, not censorship and suppression, for religious and nonreligious views alike," [Justice Neil Gorsuch](#) wrote for the majority.

The case forced the justices to wrestle with how to balance the religious and free speech rights of teachers and coaches with the rights of students not to feel pressured into participating in religious practices. The outcome could strengthen the acceptability of some religious practices in some other public school settings.

The decision is the latest in a line of Supreme Court rulings for religious plaintiffs. In another recent example, the court ruled that [Maine can't exclude religious schools](#) from a program that offers tuition aid for private education, a decision that could ease religious organizations' access to taxpayer money.

In a dissent on June 27, Justice Sonia Sotomayor wrote that the coach decision "sets us further down a perilous path in forcing states to entangle themselves with religion." She was joined in her dissent by Justice Stephen Breyer and Justice Elena Kagan.

That the court ruled for the coach is perhaps not surprising. In 2019, the court declined to take up the case at an early stage, but four of the court's conservatives agreed that a lower court decision in favor of the school district was "troubling" for its "understanding of the free speech rights of public school teachers."

The case before the justices involved Joseph Kennedy, a Christian and former football coach at Bremerton High School in Bremerton, Washington. Kennedy started coaching at the school in 2008 and initially prayed alone on the 50-yard line at the end of games. But students started joining him, and over time he began to deliver a short, inspirational talk with religious references. Kennedy did that for years and led students in locker room prayers. The school district learned what he was doing in 2015 and asked him to stop.

Kennedy stopped leading students in prayer in the locker room and on the field but wanted to continue praying on the field himself, with students free to join if they wished. Concerned about being sued for violating students' religious freedom rights, the school asked him to stop his practice of kneeling and praying while still "on duty" as a coach after the game. The school tried to work out a solution so Kennedy could pray privately before or after the game. When he continued to kneel and pray on the field, the school put him on paid leave.

Three justices on the court attended public high schools themselves while the rest attended Catholic schools.

The case is *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*, 21-418.

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