



# CATHOLIC COURIER

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## EAST SMITH PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL

### COMMENCEMENT PROGRAM

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## Schools struggling to obey court ruling

By Patricia Zapor  
*Catholic News Service*

WASHINGTON — Public schools around the country are interpreting differently the Supreme Court's 1992 ruling prohibiting school-sponsored prayer at graduations.

In some districts, long-standing practices of including prayer at graduations have been overruled. In others, administrators have agreed to let students include prayer in ceremonies the graduates themselves plan and carry out. (See related article for one such local response.)

And the Tennessee Legislature May 19 voted to permit student-led prayers at noncompulsory school activities.

Last June the Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional for public school administrators to include even nonsectarian prayers in graduation ceremonies. The case arose from a parent's objection to prayers at his daughters' middle school graduation ceremonies.

Daniel Weisman, who is Jewish, complained to the Providence, R.I., school district about prayers to Jesus Christ at his first daughter's graduation program. When his younger daughter was due to graduate from the same school, the principal arranged for a rabbi to say a nonsectarian prayer. But Weisman sued, saying he objected not to the type of prayer, but to the inclusion of any religious observance in a public school setting.

The court agreed, ruling that any involvement by public employees in bringing religion into graduations violated the separation of church and state. Even though participation in graduation ceremonies is voluntary, the court said American culture places such emphasis on commencements that attendance is an important part of growing up.

Because students could not fairly be expected to refuse to participate in graduation if they objected to the inclusion of prayers, schools themselves must not get involved in any kind of religious activity during the ceremonies, the court said.

As this year's graduations approach, principals and superintendents

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## June 20 service to honor Cohocton's last class

STORY BY

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SENIOR STAFF WRITER

COHOCTON — Members of Cohocton High School's Class of 1993 have found their own way to respond to prohibitions against prayers and baccalaureate services as part of public school graduations.

The senior class's 11 members have planned a baccalaureate service at St. Pius V Church, 35 Maple Ave., at 3 p.m. on Sunday, June 20. The graduation ceremony is scheduled for the school on Friday, June 25.

According to senior Garry Clark, he and his fellow graduates sought to hold a baccalaureate service because this year marks the school's final graduation event. The Cohocton Central School District will merge with the Wayland Cen-

tral School District on July 1.

"I wanted a baccalaureate because it's another chance to pull your family members and friends together and pray to God," Clark told the *Catholic Courier*. "We've wanted a baccalaureate since September 1st."

But class members were also well aware that they could not hold the service at the school because of the U.S. Supreme Court's 1992 ruling on graduation prayer, Clark said. Indeed, he added, they will not even be allowed to have prayers at the graduation ceremony "because of the church and state law."

Robert Wood, superintendent of Cohocton Schools, noted that this will

mark the second year the district has complied with the Supreme Court ruling.

Previously, Wood said, the school had worked with various community churches to plan graduation prayers and baccalaureate services. Although they had not received complaints, district officials decided to comply with the rulings to avoid the potential for problems.

At the same time, Wood noted, students were allowed to plan their own services. He added, however, "We told them that we can no longer officially be a part of it."

The students took the initiative to ask Father Charles T. Manning, pastor of St. ...

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