UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
CENTRAL DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA
CIVIL MINUTES—GENERAL

Case No.	**EDCV 14-2336 JGB (DTBx)**	Date	January 7, 2026
Title	***Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc., et al. v. Chino Valley Unified School District Board of Education, et al.***		

Present: The Honorable	JESUS G. BERNAL, UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE

MAYNOR GALVEZ	Not Reported
Deputy Clerk	Court Reporter

Attorney(s) Present for Plaintiff(s):	Attorney(s) Present for Defendant(s):
None Present	None Present

Proceedings: **Order (1) GRANTING Plaintiffs' First Supplemental Motion for Attorneys' Fees (Dkt. No. 156); and (2) VACATING the January 12, 2026 hearing (IN CHAMBERS)**

Before the Court is plaintiffs Freedom From Religion Foundation, Michael Anderson, Larry Maldonado, and Does 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 16, 17, and 18's (collectively, "Plaintiffs") first supplemental motion for attorneys' fees. ("Motion," Dkt. No. 156.) The Court finds these matters appropriate for resolution without a hearing. See Fed. R. Civ. P. 78; L.R. 7-15. After considering the papers filed in support of and in opposition to the Motion, the Court **GRANTS** the Motion. The hearing set for January 12, 2026 is **VACATED**.

I. BACKGROUND

On November 13, 2014, plaintiffs Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc. and Does 1-4 filed this action against defendants Board of Education, and James Na, Sylvia Orozco, Charles Dickie, Andrew Cruz, and Irene Hernandez-Blair, members of the Board of Education in their official representative capacities, alleging that these defendants violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment by instituting a policy and practice of prayer in the Chino Valley District's school board meetings. Plaintiffs sought a declaratory judgment that the defendants' conduct of prayers, Bible readings, and proselytizing at Board meetings violates Plaintiffs' rights under the federal and California constitutions, a permanent injunction enjoining the Board and its members from continuing to violate plaintiffs' constitutional rights, and nominal damages for past constitutional violations.

On February 18, 2016, the Court granted in part Plaintiffs' motion for summary judgment. ("Order," Dkt. No. 87.) Specifically, the Court held that Plaintiffs were entitled to judgment against the defendants presently on the Board, James Na, Sylvia Orozco, Andrew Cruz, and Irene Hernandez-Blair, declaring that the resolution permitting religious prayer in Board meetings, and the policy and custom of reciting prayers, Bible readings, and proselytizing at Board meetings, constitute unconstitutional government endorsements of religion in violation of Plaintiffs' First Amendment rights. (Id. at 26.) The Court further found that Plaintiffs were entitled to injunctive relief against the Board members in their individual representative capacities, and enjoined the Board members from conducting, permitting or otherwise endorsing school-sponsored prayer in Board meetings. (Id. at 25-26.)

On March 16, 2016, the defendants appealed the summary judgment order and judgment. (Dkt. No. 94.) On July 25, 2018, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals issued its opinion affirming the Order. ("Opinion," Dkt. No. 110.) The Ninth Circuit issued its mandate on January 3, 2019. (Dkt. No. 113.)

On July 31, 2025, defendants Chino Valley Unified School District Board of Education, and Chino Valley School Board of Education Board Members James Na, Sonja Shaw, Jonathan Monroe, Andrew Cruz, and John Cervantes (collectively, "Defendants") filed a motion to reopen the case. ("Motion to Reopen," Dkt. No. 126.) On October 10, 2025, this Court denied the Motion to Reopen. ("Order," Dkt. No. 149.) On November 7, 2025, Plaintiffs filed this Motion. (Motion.) In support of the Motion, Plaintiffs filed a memorandum of points and authorities in support as well as declarations by attorneys Richard L. Bolton, Matthew J. Murray, Patrick C. Elliott, and Samantha F. Lawrence. ("Memorandum," Dkt. No. 156-1; "Bolton Decl.," Dkt. No. 156-2; "Murray Decl.," Dkt. No. 156-3; "Elliott Decl.," Dkt. No. 156-4; "Lawrence Decl.," Dkt. No. 156-5.) On November 21, 2025, Defendants filed an ex parte application to stay the case. ("Ex Parte Application," Dkt. No. 159.) On December 2, 2025, the Court denied the Ex Parte Application. (Dkt. No. 161.) On December 15, 2025, Defendants opposed the Motion. ("Opposition," Dkt. No. 168.) In support of the Opposition, Defendants filed a declaration by Scott Street. ("Street Decl.," Dkt. No. 168-1.) On December 22, 2025, Plaintiffs filed a reply to the Opposition. ("Reply," Dkt. No. 171.) In support of the Reply, Plaintiffs filed supplemental declarations by attorneys Matthew Murray, Patrick Elliott, and Samantha Lawrence. ("Murray Suppl. Decl.," Dkt. No. 171-1; "Elliot Suppl. Decl.," Dkt. No. 171-2; "Lawrence Suppl. Decl.," Dkt. No. 171-3.)

II. LEGAL STANDARD

A. Legal Standard

In general, courts apply the "American Rule," where "each party in a lawsuit ordinarily shall bear its own attorney's fees unless there is express statutory authorization to the contrary." Hensley v. Eckerhart, 461 U.S. 424, 429 (1983). Under 18 U.S.C. § 1836(b)(D), a court may, in its discretion, award "reasonable attorney's fees" to a prevailing party whose "trade secret was willfully and maliciously misappropriated." Once a party establishes its entitlement to attorneys' fees, "[i]t remains for the district court to determine what fee is 'reasonable.'" Hensley, 461

U.S. at 433. District courts use the lodestar method to determine the reasonableness of attorneys' fees. See Camacho v. Bridgeport Fin., Inc., 523 F.3d 973, 978 (9th Cir. 2008). To calculate the lodestar, a court multiplies "the number of hours the prevailing party reasonably expended on the litigation by a reasonable hourly rate." Id. (quoting Ferland v. Conrad Credit Corp., 244 F.3d 1145, 1149 n.4 (9th Cir. 2001)). This lodestar figure is "presumptively reasonable." Ballen v. City of Redmond, 466 F.3d 736, 746 (9th Cir. 2006).

III. DISCUSSION

Plaintiffs move for attorneys' fees under 42 U.S.C. § 1988 as Plaintiffs are the prevailing party and incurred additional fees defending the judgment and filing this Motion. (Mot. at 1.) The Court considers whether the requested fees are reasonable.

A. Lodestar Analysis

Plaintiffs requested $134,006.00 in attorneys' fees. (Reply at 3.) Plaintiffs initially requested $118,269.00 for post-judgement work incurred before November 5, 2025, which consisted of defending the judgment in their favor from the Motion to Reopen and filing the Motion. (Mem. at 9, 12.) Plaintiffs subsequently requested an additional $15,737 in attorneys' fees for post-judgment work incurred after November 5, 2025, which consisted of work finalizing the Motion, opposing the Ex Parte Application, and filing their Reply. (Reply at 2.) Defendants do not contest that Plaintiffs are entitled to attorneys' fees, but they challenge the attorneys' requested rates and requested hours. (See Opp.) As discussed below, the Court declines to reduce the requested attorneys' fees on the bases argued by Defendant. The Court reviews the fees requested by Plaintiffs as detailed below.

Supplemental Attorneys' Fees – Work Prior to Nov. 5, 2025

Attorney	Hourly Rate	Billed Hours	Effective Hourly Rate
Richard Bolton	$1,070	56.7	$60,669
Matthew Murray	$1,070	20	$21,400
Patrick Elliott	$850	12.80	$10,880
Samantha Lawrence	$600	42.20	$489.64
Total			**$118,269.00**

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Supplemental Attorneys' Fees – Work Post-Nov. 5, 2025

Attorney	Hourly Rate	Billed Hours	Effective Hourly Rate
Matthew Murray	$1,070	11.3	$7,062[1]
Patrick Elliott	$850	3.5	$2,975
Samantha Lawrence	$600	9.5	$5,700
Total			**$15,737.00**

Supplemental Attorneys' Fees – Total Work

Attorney	Hourly Rate	Billed Hours	Effective Hourly Rate
Richard Bolton	$1,070	56.7	$60,669
Matthew Murray	$1,070	31.3	$28,462
Patrick Elliott	$850	16.3	$13,855
Samantha Lawrence	$600	51.7	$31,020
Total			**$134,006.00**

The Court calculates as Plaintiffs' lodestar the amount of $134,006.00. The total amount of Plaintiffs' requested attorneys' fees is $134,006.00

1. Hourly Rates

Reasonable fees are calculated according to the prevailing market rates in the relevant legal community. Gates v. Deukmejian, 987 F.2d 1392, 1405 (9th Cir. 1992). Because "the relevant community is the forum in which the district court sits," the prevailing rates in the Central District of California control here. Prison Legal News v. Schwarzenegger, 608 F.3d 446, 454 (9th Cir. 2010). Plaintiffs request the hourly rates for each of Plaintiffs' attorneys as listed above. Defendants oppose the requested hourly rates on the basis that they "are unreasonable and exceed the market rates for comparable work in this district." (Opp. at 2.)

First, Defendants argue that the requested hourly rates are "far above the prevailing market rates in the Central District of California." (Opp. at 3.) In support of their argument,

[1] Plaintiffs request $7,062 for Attorney Murray's work after November 5, 2025. (Reply at 3.) However, multiplying Attorney Murray's requested hourly rate ($1,070) by his requested hours (11.3) results in a product of $12,091. Attorney Murray provides no explanation for this discrepancy. (See Murray Suppl. Decl.) The Court reviewed Attorney Murray's time records and found that the requested hours correctly add up to 11.3 hours and that each entry has the correct product (rate*hours) under the "fees" column. (Id., Ex A.) Adding together all the requested fees results in a sum of $12,091. However, the total provided on Attorney Murray's time records is $7,062. (Id.) Although Attorney Murray might be entitled to $12,091 based on his time records, the Court declines to grant a higher sum than that specifically requested by Attorney Murray.

Plaintiffs point to two out-of-district cases that awarded lower hourly rates: Lenk v. Monolithic Power Sys., Inc., No. 16-CV-02625-BLF, 2018 WL 500267 (N.D. Cal. Jan. 19, 2018), and Deocampo v. Potts, No. 2:06-1283 WBS, 2014 WL 4230911 (E.D. Cal. Aug. 25, 2014). (Id. at 3-4.) These cases date back to 2014 and 2018, and Defendants make no argument as to how these two out-of-district cases, from 11 and 7 years ago, respectively, demonstrate the current prevailing market rate. (See Opp.) Additionally, Defendants point to the declaration by Scott Street, which they filed in support, in support of their argument. (Opp. at 3.) However, Mr. Street claims that Plaintiffs' attorneys' hours are above the prevailing market rate merely because they are above the rates his own firm charges. (Street Decl. ¶¶ 11, 13, 18.) While Mr. Street's firm's rates may serve as one data point for determining the prevailing market rate, the Court is not convinced that Mr. Street's declaration alone is sufficient proof that Plaintiffs' rates are above the prevailing market rate.

By contrast, Plaintiffs cite to multiple cases, most of which are in-district cases, to support that their rates match the prevailing market rate. (Mem. at 14.) Defendants argue that Plaintiffs' cases are "not analogous," presumably because none of the cases cited are civil rights cases. (Opp. at 4-5.) However, the Court is unaware of, and Defendants do not cite to, any case requiring that the prevailing market rate be set in relation to similar cases. "[T]he proper scope of comparison is not so limited, but rather extends to all attorneys in the relevant community engaged in 'equally complex Federal litigation,' no matter the subject matter." Prison Legal News v. Schwarzenegger, 608 F.3d 446, 455 (9th Cir. 2010) (citing Blum v. Stenson, 465 U.S. 886, 893 (1984)).

Finally, Defendants contend that Plaintiffs' attorneys' hourly rates are excessive because the high number of hours they request place in doubt their claimed expertise and experience, which justify their hourly rates. (Opp. at 6-8.) However, any issues with the number of hours requested must be separately challenged, to which the Court next turns. Accordingly, the Court finds that the requested hourly rates are reasonable.

2. Billed Hours

An attorneys' fee award should include compensation for all hours reasonably expended prosecuting the matter but "hours that are excessive, redundant, or otherwise unnecessary" should be excluded. Costa v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec. Admin., 690 F.3d 1132, 1135 (9th Cir. 2012). "[T]he standard is whether a reasonable attorney would have believed the work to be reasonably expended in pursuit of success at the point in time when the work was performed." Moore v. Jas. H. Matthews & Co., 682 F.2d 830, 839 (9th Cir. 1982).

As described above, Plaintiffs request attorneys' fees for 56.7 hours worked by Attorney Richard Bolton, 31.3 hours by Attorney Matthew Murray, 16.3 hours by Attorney Patrick Elliott, and 51.7 hours by Attorney Samantha Lawrence. (Reply at 3.) Defendants challenge these hours as excessive because "[a]ll that was required to resolve this matter was a straightforward analysis of a single intervening Supreme Court decision." (Opp. at 9.)

First, Defendants challenge the use of four attorneys by Plaintiffs. (Id. at 10.) In support of their argument, Defendants cite to Enyart v. Cnty. of San Bernardino, No. 5:23-CV-00540-RGK-SHK, 2024 WL 5341182, at *2 (C.D. Cal. Dec. 13, 2024), where the Court reduced the hours of a fourth attorney for attending trial "because Plaintiffs already had three attorneys billing at trial." (Opp. at 11.) A district court "may reduce the number of hours awarded because the lawyer performed unnecessarily duplicative work." Moreno v. City of Sacramento, 534 F.3d 1106, 1112 (9th Cir. 2008). However, in Enyart, the Court made no finding that the fourth attorney's hours were duplicative. 2024 WL 5341182, at *2. Instead, the Court reduced the requested hours because the plaintiffs agreed with the defendants that the hours should be reduced. Id. Thus, it is unclear if the hours billed by that fourth attorney were truly duplicative, and, if so, why. Furthermore, here, Defendants fail to argue with any specificity which of the four attorneys, or which hours, were specifically duplicative or excessive. (See Opp.) Accordingly, the Court declines to reduce any hours on this basis.

Second, Defendants argue that Plaintiffs' billing records contain duplicative entries. (Id. at 12.) In support of their argument, Defendants cite to a case from the District of Hawaii for the proposition that no more than one attorney can request fees for attending a meeting between co-counsel, a client meeting, or a meeting with opposing counsel. (Id. (citing Ko Olina Dev., LLC v. Centex Homes, No. CV. 09-00272 DAE-LEK, 2011 WL 1235548, at *12 (D. Haw. Mar. 29, 2011)).) Plaintiffs respond that this rule is a "Hawaii-specific 'rule'" that need not be "import[ed]" to this district and that strategy meetings require more than one attorney. (Reply at 11-12.) The Court agrees that often more than one attorney is required to attend meetings and calls, including strategy meetings that "are a necessary part of litigation." (Id. at 12.)

Additionally, Defendants challenge several entries as duplicative. (Opp. at 13.) As the Ninth Circuit reminds us, "determining whether work is unnecessarily duplicative is no easy task. . . One certainly expects *some* degree of duplication as an inherent part of the process." Moreno, 534 F.3d at 1112. Defendants argue that Plaintiffs' attorneys' repeated entries for contacting Plaintiffs regarding Defendants' actions, two entries for sending emails to Plaintiffs on the same day, three entries for conducting research, repeated entries for internal emails, and entries for each attorney to read this Court's Order are duplicative. (Opp. at 13.) The Court has reviewed the challenged entries and does not find that the total time devoted to each task was unreasonable or unnecessary. Multiple calls to the Plaintiffs is not surprising given the large number of plaintiffs in this case. (Reply at 7.) Furthermore, any party would hope and expect that their entire legal team would review a dispositive order by a court in their case. The Ninth Circuit has instructed that "the court should defer to the winning lawyer's professional judgment as to how much time he was required to spend on the case; after all, he won, and might not have, had he been more of a slacker." Moreno, 534 F.3d at 1112. Accordingly, the Court declines to reduce any hours as duplicative.

Third, Defendants argue that the hours Plaintiffs' counsel spent on this case were "excessive." (Opp. at 13-17.) In short, Defendants contend that Plaintiffs' counsel only needed to undertake "updates and minor research" and that researching and writing Plaintiffs' opposition to the Motion to Reopen should not have taken longer than the hours spent on the

motion for summary judgement. (Id.) As this Court previously noted, Defendants three-year delay in filing the Motion to Reopen prejudiced Plaintiffs because it "forced Plaintiffs to find new counsel" and thereby "increased Plaintiffs' costs as new counsel had to familiarize themselves with this long-running case." (Order at 4.) Furthermore, the Supreme Court has explained that "the Establishment Clause presents especially difficult questions of interpretation and application." Mueller v. Allen, 463 U.S. 388, 392 (1983). Although Defendants now try and argue that their Motion was "a long-shot," the Court will not allow Defendants to force Plaintiffs back in court and then argue that the time spent was excessive because Defendants' Motion was trivial. (Scott Decl. ¶ 14.) Furthermore, based on the arguments raised by Defendants in their Motion, the Court disagrees that "only updates to the existing research were necessary." (Opp. at 15.) Finally, Defendants merely declare how many hours they believe would be reasonable for research, drafting the opposition brief, and drafting the Motion and declarations and subsequently request reductions in Plaintiffs' attorneys' hours to fit that seemingly arbitrary number without specifying which entries might be "unnecessarily duplicative." Moreno, 534 F.3d at 1112. Accordingly, the Court declines to reduce the requested hours as excessive.

Fourth, Defendants challenge several entries as "block billing entries." (Opp. at 17.) The Court has reviewed the challenged entries and does not find that they represent block billing. Accordingly, the Court declines to reduce any entries as block billing entries.

The Court grants Plaintiffs' attorneys' fees in the amount of $134,006.00.

IV. CONCLUSION

For the above reasons, the Court **ORDERS** the following:

1. The Court **GRANTS** Plaintiffs' Motion and **AWARDS** Plaintiffs' counsel $134,006.00 in attorneys' fees;

2. The Court **VACATES** the January 12, 2026 hearing.

IT IS SO ORDERED.