

Florida School District Sued for Barring Bible Distribution

A Christian legal firm is suing a southwest Florida school district that prohibited Bible distribution on public school campuses.

Liberty Counsel filed a lawsuit Thursday on behalf of World Changers of Florida challenging the Collier County school district's decision to prohibit the Naples, Florida-based ministry from passing out free Bibles on Religious Freedom Day, which is recognized Jan. 16.

The Bibles were distributed for two years without incident to interested students outside school hours. The group included a disclaimer stating that the school neither sponsored nor endorsed the Bible giveaway.

But in 2008, the district revised its policy to require nonprofit organizations to obtain approval of the superintendent and a Community Request Committee appointed by the superintendent in order to distribute literature on school campuses.

The policy also states that requests must be "carefully reviewed to ensure that such activities promote student interests, provide educational benefit to the students, and do not exploit the school system, its employees, students or parents," according to the lawsuit.

Liberty Counsel said other nonprofit groups have been allowed to distribute literature on campuses, including military recruiters, a Little League organization, and local Humane Society, 4H and YMCA groups. The lawsuit claims World Changers was denied its distribution request because the district wants

to censor its message.

The school district “denied World Changers access for no other reason than the religious content and viewpoint of the literature it wishes to distribute, specifically Bibles,” the lawsuit states. “This unequal treatment, based upon the religious nature of the literature World Changers wishes to distribute, is unconstitutional content-based discrimination, because World Changers’ materials otherwise fit within the parameters [the district] set for the forum.”

Liberty Counsel argues that the First Amendment prohibits government religious speech, not private religious speech or literature.

“How sad that on the eve of Independence Day, when we celebrate the religious and political freedom our forefathers won for us at the cost of much blood and great sacrifice, we are compelled to sue to protect the right simply to make free Bibles available to students in public schools,” said Mathew D. Staver, founder of Liberty Counsel and dean of Liberty University School of Law. “Many of our Founding Fathers were taught to read using the Bible. If it had no educational value, then many of them would have been illiterate.”

World Changers is seeking permission to distribute Bibles and nominal damages, which include attorneys’ fees.