

Liberty Counsel Gains Constitutional Freedoms for Florida School District

A Florida school district is no longer under the “reign of terror” of the American Civil Liberties Union. After litigation brought by Liberty Counsel, the ACLU and the Santa Rosa County School District, located in Florida’s panhandle, have agreed to modify a prior Consent Decree.

As a result of the settlement, the organization won back dozens of constitutional freedoms for teachers, staff, students and members of the community. Liberty Counsel is “an international nonprofit litigation, education and policy organization dedicated to advancing religious freedom, the sanctity of life and the family.”

Students will once again be allowed to voluntarily pray, submit religious answers in homework, and freely participate in private, after-school, religious programs. Teachers will now be able to pray at school during their break times, pray during school events in a nonofficial capacity, attend and fully participate in baccalaureate services, have a Bible on their desk, wear religious jewelry, assign readings from the Bible to students when relevant to nonreligious academic assignments and more. “God bless” is no longer forbidden.

“We are pleased that freedom has been restored to Santa Rosa County,” says Mathew D. Staver, founder of Liberty Counsel and dean of Liberty University School of Law. “From the beginning we contended that this Consent Decree went too far. We did not rest until we returned the constitutional rights stolen by the ACLU.”

The ACLU initially filed suit against the school district and contained a Consent Decree, in which a person or company

agrees to take specific actions without admitting fault or guilt for the situation that led to the lawsuit. The district rejected Liberty Counsel's offer to represent it pro bono, so the organization eventually filed a direct suit against the district to regain the constitutional rights taken away by the Consent Decree.

For three years, the ACLU threatened people with contempt charges. Liberty Counsel defended Principal Frank Lay and Athletic Director Robert Freedman against such charges, which could have incurred a \$5,000 fine, six months in jail and loss of their collective 70 years of retirement benefits. Their alleged crime: a short blessing over a meal.

The litigating organization also defended staff worker Michelle Winkler against civil contempt charges—up to \$30,000 in fines—after her husband said a prayer in a neighboring county at a private event to honor non-instructional staff.