

Liberty Counsel: School Violated Christian Student's Religious Freedom

It all started with a small note and Bible verse Christina Zavala of Palmdale, California, tucked into her 7-year-old son's packed lunch for school.

During lunch at Desert Rose Elementary School, the boy would read the note, and shared it with a couple of his friends. The daily notes soon became an expectation of the other children, who excitedly begged him for copies of their own.

The notes themselves eventually grew to include short stories from the Bible to provide context for the verses. But after one little girl asked her teacher to look at "the most beautiful story I've ever seen," the notes were banned from lunchtime distribution.

Zavala's son was told the school gate was the only location at which he could give the Bible verses to his friends, and only after school hours. When she wrote to the school for clarification, since she understood the religious freedom issues involved, her son was reprimanded in front of the whole class, and told to stop talking about religion or sharing his mother's notes.

He returned home in tears.

Despite that, Zavala and her son complied with the school's directive. Soon, as many as 15 students would show up, looking forward each day to the after-school Bible notes.

Last month, the school principal approached Zaval's husband, demanding the notes be handed out only on a public sidewalk, far from the exit, off school property. The family immediately

complied with the new demand, but that afternoon, a Los Angeles County Deputy Sheriff came to their door, demanding the note sharing cease altogether because “someone might be offended.”

The family has since asked Liberty Counsel to assist in defending their son’s First Amendment-protected religious freedom. The organization’s vice president of legal affairs and chief litigation counsel, Horatio “Harry” Mihet, called the school’s actions a “gross violation of the rights of a child.”

Attorneys representing the family on behalf of Liberty Counsel have sent a letter to the school district’s superintendent, demanding action be taken to ensure the child’s rights are no longer violated.

“Students do not check their constitutional rights at the schoolhouse gate,” he said. “If students are permitted to pass out Valentine or birthday cards at school, or to talk about Superman and Captain America at lunch, they cannot be prohibited from sharing Bible verses and discussing their faith during their free, non-instructional time.”

That the school district enlisted a police officer to intimidate the family makes the case even more outrageous, Mihet added. He said he would expect something like this to happen in Communist Romania, where he went to elementary school.

“But cops don’t bully 7-year-olds who want to talk about Jesus in the Land of the Free,” he concluded.