

School District Reverses Policy, Student Permitted to Wear 'Jesus Loves Me' Facemask

In a significant turn of events and what could be termed as a victory for religious freedom, a Mississippi school district has agreed to retract a policy that banned political or religious slogans on face masks, a conservative legal group said Wednesday.

The about face came in response to a lawsuit from the family of a girl who was told not to wear a face mask with the slogan, "Jesus Loves Me."

The lawsuit was filed in Nov. 2020 by Alliance Defending Freedom on behalf of Matthew and Jennifer Booth and their then third-grade daughter, Lydia, against the Simpson County School District in the community of Pinola, about 35 miles south of the capital of Jackson. At that time, many schools in Mississippi, and across the U.S., required students to wear masks due to the COVID pandemic.

The Associated Press reported that lawsuits in more than a dozen states since 2020 have "challenged mask rules in schools, many of them over mandates for students to cover their faces to mitigate the spread of the virus."

A press release put forward by the school district read that "Lydia Booth wanted to peacefully share her views with her schoolmates by wearing the mask." The principal at her school in Pinola, however, asked her to remove and replace her mask even though Booth had previously worn the mask without disruption on Oct. 13, 2020.

Two days after the incident, school administrators announced a districtwide policy that prohibited messages on masks that are “political, religious, sexual or inappropriate symbols, gestures or statements that may be offensive, disruptive or deemed distracting to the school environment.

Verbiage in the lawsuit stated that, “Defendants allow students at SCS to wear masks and other clothing with a wide variety of expressive messages during school, including ‘Black Lives Matter’ and masks and shirts promoting many sports teams,” read the suit, in part.

“Defendants’ Religious Speech Policy and practice are overbroad because they sweep within their ambit protected First Amendment expression.”

“No student should be singled out for peacefully expressing her religious beliefs,” ADF Senior Counsel Tyson Langhofer, director of the ADF Center for Academic Freedom, said in a statement. “Today’s students will be tomorrow’s legislators, judges, educators and voters. That’s why it’s so important that public schools demonstrate the First Amendment values they are supposed to be teaching to students.”

 Michael Ross, an attorney for Alliance Defending Freedom, said in a statement Wednesday, “Public schools have no business discriminating against a 9-year-old for her religious expression. Other students within the school district have freely worn masks with the logos of local sports teams or even the words ‘Black Lives Matter.’ Lydia deserves and will now have an equal opportunity to peacefully express her beliefs.”

Masks are now optional but “highly recommended” in Simpson County Schools, according to the district’s website. They are required only for people returning to school after having COVID or those in close contact with someone else who has had the illness. {eo}

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