

Vindication Comes to Teacher Who Was Fired for Giving Student a Bible

A New Jersey school district violated the law when it fired a teacher who handed a Bible to a student, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission ruled on December 15, 2014. The ruling was made public Tuesday.

The EEOC determined there was reasonable cause to believe the Phillipsburg School District discriminated against Walt Tutka, a substitute teacher. The EEOC also said religion and retaliation played a factor in Tutka's firing.

"This is a great indication the EEOC is taking religious liberty seriously and they are going to enforce the law—and in this case make sure Walt's rights are protected," Liberty Institute attorney Hiram Sasser told me.

Liberty Institute is a law firm that specializes in religious liberty cases.

"This sends a message to school districts that their natural allergic reaction to religion is misplaced, and not only is it wrong—but it's also an egregious violation of the law," Sasser said.

As I first reported, Tutka was working as a substitute teacher on Oct. 12, 2013, when he ran afoul of school policies. He told a straggling student at the end of a line, "The first shall be last and the last shall be first."

The student asked on a number of occasions where the line was from, and Tutka told him it was from the Bible. When he discovered the child did not have a Bible, Tutka gave him his personal copy. It was not all that unusual because Tutka is a

member of Gideons International, a ministry known for providing Bibles to school children across the world.

On Oct. 18, Tutka was summoned to the principal's office, where he was accused of violating a school policy that bans the distribution of religious materials and another that directs teachers to be neutral when discussion religious material.

He was fired on Jan. 14.

Sasser said he hopes the school district will reinstate Tutka.

"If they don't do the right thing, they will face some serious consequences," he told me. "They are going to be liable for damages."

I reached out to George Chando, the superintendent of the Phillipsburg School District. He declined to return my call.

My advice to him is to do the right thing, or Liberty Institute will go after him like a pit bull going after a pork chop.

Sasser said the EEOC ruling should serve as a warning to other school districts around the nation.

"You can't just fire people because they happen to hand a Bible to somebody while they are at work," he said.

Sasser said he believes the school district was out to get Walt because he is a Gideon. I obtained a copy of an email from Phillipsburg Middle School Assistant Principal John Stillo that suggest the school district had an issue with the well-known religious group.

"It has been brought to the administration's attention that Gideons may be near our campus to distribute literature to our students," Stillo wrote in a memo to the school's staff. "Please make sure they DO NOT step foot onto our campus at any

time. There will be added police and security presence at dismissal."

Gideon International has a long history of providing Bibles to public school students, but many districts have banned the religious society in recent years. Ironically, the Gideons are welcome to distribute Bibles and deliver speeches in Russian schools.

The Phillipsburg School District should rehire Walt. And it owes him a big apology. They waged a disgusting public war against this fine, upstanding man simply because he gave a child a Bible. Shame on you, Phillipsburg School District. Shame on you.

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