

Atheists Drive Jesus Christ out of Kansas School

Public school officials in the small Kansas town of Chanute are trying to find a new home for a portrait of Jesus Christ after a civil liberties group demanded its removal from the town's middle school.

Local churches and other groups are offering to house the portrait, which had hung in the school since at least the 1950s, and community leaders have been working to defuse anger over its removal.

The district's new superintendent ordered it taken down Thursday from Royster Middle School after the Freedom From Religion Foundation notified him that the display in a public school amounted to an "egregious violation of the First Amendment."

"I conferred with legal counsel and both of them told me to be in compliance with state and federal law that we had to have it removed," said Chanute Public Schools Superintendent Richard Proffitt.

Proffitt said he has been fending off complaints from around the country since the portrait's removal from Royster, which has about 400 students.

"I'm sick of this," said Jack Lynch, 53, who grew up in Chanute and remembers the Christ picture at Royster. "This country was founded on Christian beliefs. In God we trust. Now people want to come in and change all that. If they don't like it let them leave."

The school district is now trying to determine how it came to possess the portrait in the first place. If the original owners or donors do not want the portrait back, the district

will find another home for the artwork, said Proffitt.

Ryan Jayne, law clerk at the Freedom From Religion Foundation, said the group was pleased that Chanute acted so quickly. Jayne said a “local community member” had complained to the organization and sought its help in seeking removal of the portrait.

“They were afraid to bring it up themselves so they came to us. In areas that are predominantly Christian, the backlash that non-Christians receive when they speak out against government endorsement of religion can be very severe,” said Jayne.

Chanute, located in southeast Kansas, has a population of roughly 9,200 people, including about 1,800 children in the school district.

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