

Atheists Lose Again, 'God Bless America' Not Unconstitutional After All

A Florida high school that last week told a student to stop adding the phrase "God bless America" when reading scripted morning announcements, announced on Tuesday his use of the phrase does not violate the U.S. Constitution.

The initial decision drew protests and irate phone calls from around the nation, school officials said. After seeking legal advice, the Nassau County School District issued a press release on Tuesday clarifying its ruling on the phrase.

However, the school district said students would still have to stick to the script in morning announcements and refrain from any embellishment.

"Upon consultation with legal counsel and review of legal advisories, the Nassau County School District has taken the position that a student's use of the phrase "God Bless America" during the morning announcements at Yulee High School does not violate the Constitution of the United States," it stated.

But Nassau County School District spokeswoman Sharyl Wood said the morning script restriction still applies. "The admonition not to add to the script applies to anything," she said.

The student, who was not identified by the school district, was not punished, she said. "The student in question has been quite cooperative and understands not to add to the script," she added.

The principal at Yulee High School, located in north Florida near Jacksonville, had told the student to stopping use the

phrase after receiving a six-page letter from the American Humanist Association, a group that describes itself as advocating for humanists, atheists and secular governance.

The letter said two Yulee students who are atheists had complained about the use over the past several weeks of the phrase.

On Tuesday the school district said the complaint filed through the American Humanist Association “should not supersede the right of other students to use the phrase, as it does not promote any religious denomination and is commonly used as an expression of patriotism.”

Yulee High was flooded with phone calls last week, Wood said, with some people waving signs in protest near the school, which sits in a conservative region of Florida.

The legal center of the Humanist Association called the phrase “God bless America” a religious message that “is invidious toward atheists and other nonbelievers,” and said it violates the section of the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment that “commands a separation of church and state,” according to the group’s letter.

The First Amendment also guarantees freedom of religion and freedom of speech.

© 2015 Thomson Reuters. All rights reserved.