

Graduate's Speech Offers Scripture Despite School Opposition

Mariah Kirby wanted to exhort students that “the soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied” (Prov. 13:14) during her graduation speech on Saturday. But Carolina Public Charter District and Provost Academy officials told her she couldn't.

Provost Academy recently named Kirby “Student of the Year”—and she was also the first graduate from the school who started there as a freshman. School officials asked Kirby, along with the school's valedictorian and salutatorian, to compose a short speech to deliver at the school's graduation ceremony on Saturday. The academy, an online public charter school, has even used Kirby for promotional purposes in the past.

But using the Bible seemed to cross their promotional lines. Officials told Kirby she could not “use a religious quote because we are a public school.” The school reversed course after the Alliance Defense Fund (ADF) sent a letter to school officials regarding the unconstitutionality of prohibiting Kirby from including a Bible verse in her speech.

“Public schools should encourage, not shut down, the free exchange of ideas, and that includes individual student expression contained in a graduation speech,” says ADF Legal Counsel Jeremy Tedesco. “School officials have wisely decided to allow Mariah to include the proverb, and we hope other schools will follow their example in acting quickly to respect the constitutionally protected rights of their students.”

The ADF letter to district and school officials explained, “School officials did not place any content limitations on Mariah's speech. Rather, when she asked what the speech should

be about, they told her 'anything.' Mariah's speech addresses a topic that is commonly addressed at graduation ceremonies: having the courage and drive to chase your dreams. Mariah's speech expresses her religious perspective on this topic through her quotation of Proverbs 13:4. Censoring this religious reference from Mariah's speech violates her **First Amendment** rights."

ADF delivered its letter to district and school officials on Monday after school officials told Kirby by email she could not use the proverb. The same day, the executive director of the academy replied to the letter, writing, "Upon further review of the matter, the school has determined that Mariah will be permitted to deliver her speech as written."

"Removing the voice of faith from schools sends a message to all students that religion is something to be ashamed of," Tedesco says. "The First Amendment forbids schools from singling out and excluding religious speech and speakers in this way."