

Jesus Gets No Honor (or Love) in Nazareth School

Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) filed a federal lawsuit Monday against a Pennsylvania school district on behalf of a first-grade student and his parents. In February, Nazareth Area School District (NASD) unconstitutionally prohibited the student from distributing St. Valentine's Day cards to his classmates because the cards contained a note that mentioned God and included the Bible verse John 3:16 after a sentence about the history of St. Valentine's Day.

"Public schools ought to encourage, not suppress, the free exchange of ideas, including those communicated through Valentine's Day cards. A Bible verse and a reference to God does not make such a card unconstitutional," says ADF legal counsel Matt Sharp. "Religious expression is just as protected by the First Amendment as other messages that students communicate."

"To single out a faith-based message for censorship is exactly the type of hostility to religion that the First Amendment forbids," adds ADF senior legal counsel Jeremy Tedesco. "We hope the school district will revise its policies to respect the constitutionally protected free speech of its students and make ongoing litigation unnecessary."

In February, the parents of the first-grader helped him assemble the cards for "Friendship Day," the politically correct name the school district uses for St. Valentine's Day. The cards included a note that stated, "Happy Valentine's Day! St. Valentine was imprisoned and martyred for presiding over marriages and for spreading the news of God's love. In honor of St. Valentine's Day, I want you to know that God loves you!!! 'God so loved the world that He gave His only son, so

that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but have eternal life.' John 3:16."

When the student arrived with his cards at Floyd R. Shafer Elementary School in Nazareth, his teacher noticed the faith-based notes and brought them to the attention of the school's principal, William Mudlock. Mudlock ordered them removed because of their religious nature and because they contained a Bible verse, telling the student's parents that they could be "offensive" to others.

At a meeting with the student's parents, Mudlock explained that the child's note sought to "establish the supremacy" of his faith over others as prohibited by school district policy. He pointed to NASD Policy 220 on "Unprotected Student Expression," which states that school officials can prohibit student expression that seeks "to establish the supremacy of a particular religious denomination, sect or point of view."

The complaint filed in *J.A. v. Nazareth Area School District* with the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania explains that the same federal court struck down an identically worded policy at another Pennsylvania school district in 2008, saying that such policies "restrict what effectively amounts to all religious speech, which is clearly not permissible under the First Amendment."

Ted Hoppe, one of nearly 2,300 attorneys allied with Alliance Defending Freedom, is serving as local counsel on the case.