

NY School Violates Rights of 20 Christian Teens to Co-Mingle

Educators at Ward Melville High School are either woefully ignorant of the U.S. Constitution or they really don't like Christian teenagers.

For the second year in a row, the Long Island, New York high school has denied students the right to form a Christian club.

"I feel like they have something against me and my faith," 17-year-old John Raney told me. "I feel marginalized."

John is the founder of Students United in Faith, a service-oriented Christian club. Nearly 20 young people wanted to join the club—but the school said no.

"I wanted to start the club because I thought it would provide a safe space for Christians to meet and talk about their faith," he said.

As John noted, there aren't many places like that in Long Island—especially at Ward Melville High School.

So here's the backstory:

Last year, the school pulled the same stunt. They banned John's club because of its religious nature. Attorneys with Liberty Institute, a law firm specializing in religious liberty cases, stepped in and threatened to sue.

After a school district investigation, Superintendent Cheryl Pedisich reversed the ban and apologized to John. She told television station WCBS the initial reason for rejection was "apparently inaccurately conveyed."

And by “inaccurately conveyed” she means they got their hand caught in the religious liberty cookie jar.

Fast forward nine months later, and the school once again is telling the Christian kids they aren’t welcome to co-mingle.

I called the school district to find out what was going on. Twice. I also sent an email. They got back to me late Monday afternoon. Superintendent Pedisich sent me a prepared statement denying their decision had anything to do with religion.

Here’s what she said, “The religious club called Students United in Faith was denied because contractual guidelines regarding minimum participation (20 students) in student co-curricular programs was not met, nor did Ward Melville High School have the financial means to fund this program. The district does not have a practice of discrimination of any kind. We embrace our diverse school community and strive to maintain an environment that promotes tolerance, understanding and respect for all.”

Her statement is linked with what Assistant Principal Christian Losee told John. He cited a lack of student interest in the group as well as the school’s “financial limitations.”

So John picked up the phone and called Liberty Institute, a nationally known religious liberty law firm. “I cannot imagine why they would come back a second time to discriminate,” said attorney Hiram Sasser. “For some reason, Ward Melville High School does not want to follow the Equal Access law.”

Sasser fired off a letter to the school district demanding the Christian students be allowed to form their club.

“This is not a complicated issue,” Sasser wrote. “Simply put, public schools cannot discriminate against religious clubs and must treat them equally, and provide them equal access to school facilities, as non-religious clubs.”

Sasser was able to compile a list of all the school's clubs—33 in all. They've got everything from a fishing club to a ceramics club. They even have a Gay-Straight Alliance.

"They let all these other clubs meet with no problem whatsoever," John told me. "But the second me and my friends mention faith or mention God, they get up in arms about it—like there's something wrong with believing in these things."

Sasser said the law is clear. It doesn't matter if only two people wanted to join the Christian club—the school must accommodate them.

"If they allow the fishing club, they have to allow the Christian club, too," he said. "They cannot exclude the Christian club."

After what happened last year, I suspect the school knows that. It seems to me they're just engaged in a bit of bullying and intimidation.

"It sends a chilling message to all faith groups—telling them the school views these clubs as not acceptable," Sasser said.

John's mom, Trudy Fischer, told me she's proud that her son is sticking up for the club.

"I was really surprised in today's age that children still have to stand up for their First Amendment rights," she said. "Tolerance is really preached in their school. They talk about tolerance, but when it comes to this—there is no tolerance. They want to shut them up."

That's right, Trudy. They want your son to shut up. They want to marginalize these young Christian teenagers and make them think there's something inappropriate, something sleazy about their religious beliefs. But what's truly sleazy is government-employed bigots continuing to bully Christian teens

trying to do good deeds.

Todd Starnes *is host of Fox News & Commentary, heard on hundreds of radio stations. Sign up for his American Dispatch newsletter, be sure to join his Facebook page, and follow him on Twitter. His latest book is God Less America.*