

Previously Censored Student Pro-Life Group Holds First Meeting of 2020

Students participating in a pro-life club held their first official event of 2020 on Monday afternoon, after their high school initially refused to recognize it as an official club because it was deemed too “controversial.”

In November, Alliance Defending Freedom sent a letter on behalf of a student to officials with Collier County Public Schools and Gulf Coast High School over the school’s decision. The letter explained that the refusal to recognize Sharks 4 Life, which would be an independent student group affiliated with the national Students for Life organization, was clearly unconstitutional and violated the federal Equal Access Act. The school has since relented, certified the club’s faculty adviser, and acknowledged the club’s official status.

“The First Amendment protects every student’s freedom of speech and expression,” said ADF Legal Counsel Michael Ross. “Public school officials also can’t play favorites when approving student organizations or refuse to recognize a student organization for being too ‘political’ or ‘controversial,’ especially when they have rightfully approved a whole host of other clubs formed around religious, political, and social interests. We’re grateful that Gulf Coast High School acknowledged our client’s constitutionally protected rights, has chosen to recognize Sharks 4 Life as an official club, and affirms that students have the right to express their beliefs about the immense value of every human life.”

ADF attorneys represent student Gabrielle Gabbard, who applied in early August for recognition of Sharks 4 Life. After

Gabbard and one of her faculty advisors met with Assistant Principal Catherine Crawford-Brown to discuss the matter, Crawford-Brown reaffirmed her refusal to recognize the club and then threatened one of the advisors with termination if she continued to try to be a faculty advisor for Sharks 4 Life. Crawford-Brown made these remarks even though she knew that the club needed a faculty advisor to be approved. Because of these remarks, both of the faculty advisors promptly withdrew as faculty advisors for the club.

In response to ADF's letter, school officials agreed to recognize Sharks 4 Life and help them secure an advisor. However, school officials warned that the school had to approve any information that Sharks 4 Life wants to distribute, and that there may be certain things Sharks 4 Life would not be allowed to distribute. ADF responded with a follow-up letter to the principal on Dec. 3, emphasizing that the school—under the First Amendment and under federal law—could not legally treat Sharks 4 Life differently than other groups. ADF's second letter also warned that the school's preapproval requirement also unconstitutionally censored students' speech.

"Courageous student leaders across the country face real opposition from their schools because they choose to speak for the defenseless and want to peacefully educate their fellow students about abortion," said Students for Life of America President Kristan Hawkins. "The Constitution and federal law are both clear that public schools can't discriminate against pro-life groups. Thankfully, Gulf Coast High School has finally agreed to do the right thing and respect the rights of its students."

Students for Life of America is a national pro-life organization dedicated to training and equipping students to lead local pro-life student groups like Sharks 4 Life at secondary schools and universities. They have more than 1,200 groups across the country, including 28 groups in Florida.