

Remove Painting of Kid's Praying Or Else, Atheists Threaten

A middle school in Oklahoma is being threatened with legal action unless it removes a painting that depicts two children praying, which has hung at the school for more than 18 years.

To its credit, the Putnam County School District has flatly refused to remove the artwork. District officials said no one had ever complained about until a letter was received from the secularist Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), which is based in Wisconsin.

Even though school officials insist that no specific religion or message is promoted through the print that hangs in Kenneth Cooper Middle School, the FFRF claims the painting discriminates against children who choose not to pray, according to a report Wednesday on .

"It is our information and understanding that in the Kenneth Cooper Middle School office hangs a religious poster with an image entitled, 'Faith in America' by Donald Zolan," stated FFRF staff attorney Andrew Seidel to begin his plea for the print's removal. "The image features two children with their hands clasped in prayer, with an American flag background."

Justifying the removal?

Seidel contended that even if the young boy and girl portrayed in the painting are not actually praying—but merely clasping their hands together—the existence of the painting at the school would still violate the First Amendment, calling for it to be purged from campus.

In response, a lawyer for the school district pointed out to

the FFRF attorney that his atheistic organization, which is generally opposed to religious freedom, stands alone in its contention that the painting poses a problem on campus.

“The poster complained of has hung in the school office for 18 years without a complaint, prior to your letter,” declared Putnam County School District Attorney Anthony Childers on behalf of the entire district. “To date, the district has not received any complaint from any resident, student or patron of the district who believes that the image conveys an improper religious message.”

Not giving in to the threat

This order for removal was utterly refused by the Putnam County School District, which had no intention of getting rid of the painting that has been enjoyed by faculty, staff and students alike for nearly two decades.

“We cannot agree that the poster displayed in the office is a per se violation of the Establishment Clause of the United States Constitution,” Childers was quoted as saying in the report. “Though, as you’ve pointed out, the title given to the artwork by the original artist is labeled ‘Faith in America,’ there is no text displayed with the poster which imputes the artist’s intent, theme or title.”

The print in question shows a young boy and girl reverently praying with the Stars and Stripes as a patriotic backdrop. The district’s attorney argues that in no way does this artist’s rendition constitute the endorsement of any type of religion, as he made clear in his response to the FFRF’s demand letter.

Childers attempted to put everything into perspective from both a logical and legal standpoint, implying that FFRF’s argument is based on intimidation and misinformation to get the school district to acquiesce to its demands out of fear of an impending costly lawsuit.

"We believe that a neutral viewer of the poster would not find that the image attempts to proselytize or promote any particular faith, and does not create coercive pressure on students who may see the image," Childers concluded. "At this time, we do not believe that the image violates the Establishment Clause and the District will not agree to remove the image from its office."