

School Censors Second Grader's John 3:16 Message

What was meant to be a sweet holiday left a bitter taste in the mouth of second grader Dexter Thielhelm.

At a Valentine's Day "friendship party and chocolate celebration," James Madison Elementary School officials confiscated Thielhelm's gifts of candy-filled water bottles with a typewritten note that included the message "Jesus Loves You" and the text of the Bible verse **John 3:16**. The Sheboygan, Wis., school's principal only allowed the gifts to be distributed after his message was removed.

Thielhelm's mother, Melissa Wolf, is working with the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) to educate the educators about her son's constitutionally protected right to **free speech**.

David French, a senior attorney with the ACLJ, issued a demand letter this week to the Sheboygan Area School District, asking for assurances that the district will "cease its viewpoint-discriminatory treatment of **religious speech**."

"It has been well settled by the Supreme Court that religious speech is protected by the **First Amendment** and may not be singled out for disparate treatment," says French. "To censor Dexter's speech because of its religious nature is pure and simple viewpoint discrimination."

According to District Assistant Superintendent of Student Instructional Services Mark Holzman, Thielhelm's Valentine's Day messages were censored for fear that students receiving the child's gift might not be comfortable with his **religious message**. But the Supreme Court has ruled that students cannot be prohibited from exercising their First Amendment rights simply because someone might be offended.

"It's pretty simple, really. A student does not shed his **constitutional rights** at the schoolhouse gate. The general rule is student free speech is protected absent disruption. Dexter's message was not disruptive, and the school must end its censorship," French says.

"In claiming the district's decision was necessary to maintain religious neutrality, Sheboygan District Superintendent Joe Sheehan has gotten it backwards. Neutrality would have been achieved by allowing Dexter to distribute his religious Valentine's message on the same terms that other students were permitted to distribute their Valentine's gifts."