

School Wants to Shut Down Off-Campus 'Jesus Lunch'

There's a religious liberty standoff underway in Middleton, Wisconsin.

On one side is a group of Christian moms armed with Chick-fil-A sandwiches and 400 homemade brownies. On the other side are public school administrators who believe that Jesus and plump, juicy chicken breasts are "divisive."

The controversy surrounds an off-campus lunch event—involving students at Middleton High School—known as "Jesus Lunch."

The high school allows students to eat lunch off-campus. In 2014 a small group of parents began meeting with their children in a nearby park—providing home-cooked meals along with a Christian-themed, inspirational message.

The small weekly gatherings in the fall and spring eventually morphed into a popular gathering spot for hungry kids—with nearly 500 turning out for all sorts of goodies—ranging from Chick-fil-A sandwiches and fresh fruit to hundreds of homemade brownies.

"We show up every week just to show the love of Jesus," parent Beth Williams told me. "Our mission statement for Jesus Lunch is 'food for the body, nutrition for the soul.'"

Superintendent Donald Johnson and Principal Stephen Plank called the off-campus religious gatherings "divisive," and they want the weekly non-denominational meetings shut down.

"We believe that religious or political events do not have a place in our school or on our campus, except when sponsored by a student group in accordance with our rules, which require prior approval," the pair wrote in an email sent to parents on

April 12.

The district accused the moms of violating all sorts of rules—especially in the area of food preparation. They implied the parents are putting their children in danger by hosting the weekly picnics.

“The policies in question include food handling, visitors to campus and expectations around student-organized events,” the administrators wrote. “We are in no way interested in opposing religious practice in otherwise legal circumstances.”

The district said parents are ignoring “food handling standards.”

“Food of any kind that is served to students must be approved by the school/district to ensure food safety, cleanliness and health,” they wrote. “In addition, many students are subject to food allergies, so additional protocols must be followed to safeguard students with these conditions.”

I grew up in the Deep South. Had a school administrator slandered the great homemakers in my town like they did in Middleton—they would’ve been facing a mob armed with cast iron skillets.

“These are mothers,” attorney Phillip Stamman told me. “They are spending all their time and effort to show love for these kids, and now they are being attacked by a superintendent and principal trying to intimidate them.”

Stamman is representing the moms as they figure out how to respond to the school district’s hostility towards home-cooking and Jesus.

“The [school district] is going after them because they are spreading a religious message,” Stamman tells me. “They are upset because they are sharing Christianity.”

The attorney has a valid point. What if it had been a

gathering of students protected under “non-discrimination laws”? I suspect the district would not only have approved the gathering—but also endorsed it.

And their argument over the safety of the food is a bit of a stretch. The district doesn’t seem to have a problem with kids going to McDonald’s or Taco Bell. So why are they so bothered by youngsters gathering off campus in a public park?

Well, the district is arguing that the public park is technically on-campus. They have a lease agreement with the city that allows them to use the park during school hours. So the district contends the moms and their offspring are technically on school property.

“The parents contend that it is their First Amendment Right to provide free food and hold a religiously oriented event on this property during school hours,” the administrators wrote. “The District believes that we have jurisdiction of this leased property, which is part of our campus.”

The moms believe that even though there is a lease agreement, that doesn’t make the public space off-limits.

“Fireman’s Park—a public park owned by the City of Middleton—remains accessible to everyone in the public for the purposes of assembly and free speech,” they wrote in a statement. “By law, the lease agreement between the city and the School District of Middleton does not privatize the park. The City of Middleton has sent us a letter this week and acknowledged our rental agreement of the pavilion at Fireman’s Park.”

So hence, the standoff—between the goodhearted moms and a bunch of public school administrative bullies who don’t under the concept of free speech or religious liberty.

I suspect the principal and superintendent are about to discover a valuable life lesson: you don’t tug on Superman’s

cape, and you don't mess with a bunch of moms armed with homemade brownies.