

State Closes Church Preschool After Officials Told 'You Must Mask Toddlers'

California state officials have closed an El Cajon church preschool for violating the state's COVID-19 mask mandate.

KFMB-TV reports a group of parents gathered outside the Foothills Christian Church Preschool Friday morning after the Dept. of Social Services Community Care Licensing shut the preschool down on Dec. 10.

The preschool had an enrollment of around 100 children, according to local reports.

The church's pastor, David Hoffman, told the parents that during the time of 2020 to 2021, there were 86 preschools in the county and during that time, there were 99 visits done by the state to these preschools.

"They only mentioned in all of those years, in all of those visits—99 evaluations—they only mentioned masks and preschoolers wearing masks two times. That's why we know we were targeted," Hoffman said.

Preschool Director Tiffany McHugh told KFMB the visits from Social Services started in September 2021 after a parent complained.

"From that point on we were working with licensing almost on a weekly basis over the next two months and we were trying to improve," said McHugh. "Unfortunately, it's really hard. We are going up against a lot of parents that don't want their children to be masked."

The station reached out to the Department of Social Services over the preschool's closure. Department officials directed

the station to legal documents that said both Foothills Ministries and McHugh regularly failed to ensure all employees wore a mask while indoors and failed to encourage students two years old and older to wear a mask.

The preschool's employees have alleged they were harassed and threatened over their efforts to keep masks on toddlers.

In an interview with KUSI-TV on Sunday, the church's administrative pastor, Kevin Miller, gave an update on the situation.

"Prior to September 29th of last year, we were doing what we do. Pre-COVID, we connected with about 5,000 kids every single week," Miller said. "That's the church we are. We're all about children and youth. That's what we do.

"So, we have a preschool and for six years, we were taking care of people's kids and teaching them about Jesus, and how to draw round circles. You know that kind of preschool," he joked. "They (State Social Services Department) came in and started a wrestling match. It seemed like it was doomed from the beginning, because they said, 'You must mask toddlers. Two, three, and four-year-olds.' But you can't violate their civil rights. You can't force them to wear a mask.

"And so, we said, 'OK, if you work with us, because quite frankly we have parents that don't think masking their three-year-old is a really good idea," Miller continued. "In fact, we think it's impossible. So we began that journey and we did the best we could.

"And it was very hostile from the beginning," Miller explained. "We had an analyst come in and really interviewed kids without the parents' permission or knowledge. It was really antagonistic and very, very aggressive."

Miller told the station, in response, the church reached out to State Senator Brian Jones, who talked to the state's Social

Services Department and asked them to work with the church in coming up with a solution.

“We were showing a lot of progress,” he said. “In fact, in November, they said, ‘Hey, we see the progress. We see that you’re working on it. So we’re going to sign you off on those thousands of dollars in fines.’”

The pastor said the state would fine the preschool \$600 a day, which resulted in thousands of dollars in fines. He said the state would fine them even when they weren’t open.

Miller explained the state said they were going to write off the fines and told the preschool everything was fine.

“And then they came back in just days later and shut us down,” he said.

Miller says he knew of one other school that had been given a B violation for not masking toddlers. The state gave them 10 days to fix it and two hours of investigation, he said.

“We had over 40 hours of investigation over 60 days,” he told KUSI. “Nine and a half hours at a time, disrupting. It got so bad that there were kids who were interviewed that wouldn’t come back to school because of how aggressive the energy was. We had teachers that went home crying, that just destroyed what was going on. Yeah, we think we were unfairly targeted, for sure.”

The church is appealing the state’s decision. A hearing has been scheduled for Thursday, Jan. 14. {eo}

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