

Teacher Tells Student He Can't Read the Bible in Classroom

A Florida schoolteacher humiliated a 12-year-old boy in front of an entire class after she caught him reading the Bible during free reading time.

The teacher at Park Lakes Elementary School in Fort Lauderdale ordered Giovanni Rubeo to pick up the telephone on her desk and call his parents.

As the other students watched, the teacher left a terse message on the family's answering machine.

"I noticed that he has a book—a religious book—in the classroom," she said on the recording. "He's not permitted to read those books in my classroom."

The Liberty Institute, a legal firm that specializes in religious liberty issues, is now representing the Rubeo family. They are demanding that Giovanni be allowed to read his Bible during free reading time. They also want the school to issue a written apology to the boy.

"This is the most shocking piece of evidence I've seen in the 12 years of religious liberty work that I've been doing," says Hiram Sasser, the Liberty Institute's director of litigation.

I reached out to the superintendent of Broward County Schools as well as the chairman of the school board. Neither returned my messages.

Last Christmas, Giovanni received a Bible from his local church. It quickly became a prized possession and one of his favorite books to read.

"I love reading my Bible any time that I'm allowed to read it," the boy told me in a telephone conversation.

So that's why Giovanni brought his Bible to school—to read his Bible during a 90-minute session designated for free reading.

In February and March, the boy's teacher ordered him to stop reading his Bible. During those instances, the child complied with his teacher's demands. But when his father discovered what happened, he began investigating and determined the school was violating his son's constitutional rights.

From that point on, Rubeo told his son that if his teacher or anyone else at the school told him he could not read his Bible during free reading time, he was to politely ask the teacher to call home.

And that's what happened on April 8. When the children pulled out their books, the teacher immediately targeted Giovanni.

"When I was reading my Bible, she said, 'Giovanni, what book is that?' I was a little afraid," he told me. "She told me to put it on her desk and I said no."

When Giovanni conveyed his father's instructions, she ordered him to walk to the front of the class and call home—in front of the entire class. Rubeo was not at home, so the teacher left a message, of which I have a copy.

"I don't understand why a school would want to keep a child from reading his Bible during free reading time," Giovanni's father told me. "And I've never gotten an answer to that question."

After he received the teacher's message, Rubeo contacted the school. He said the principal said she would have to turn the matter over to their legal department. Rubeo then wrote a letter to the school ordering them to cease and desist the harassment of his son.

"This is to give you written notice to stop breaking the law & violating my son Giovanni Rubeo's constitution first amendment right of free speech and religious expression," the letter states. "Do NOT tell my son he cannot read his Bible during free reading hours during class or any time when students are allowed to read books of their choice."

Liberty Institute provided me with a response from Cynthia Dias, the principal of the school.

"Your child is permitted to read the Bible before school, after school and during lunch, in accordance to the law," the letter states.

This, friends, is what we call parsing words. Notice that the principal avoided the issue. This is about letting a child read a Bible during free reading time.

Sasser says the school violated the boy's constitutional rights. He also accuses them of viewpoint discrimination, restricting the free exercise of religion and engaging in hostility toward religion.

He cites U.S. Department of Education guidance that allows for students to read their Bibles during noninstructional time. It reads in part, "Students may read their Bibles or other scriptures, say grace before meals, and pray or study religious materials with fellow students during recess, the lunch hour, or other noninstructional time to the same extent that they may engage in nonreligious activities."

"This is a pretty serious situation," Sasser says. As that audio recording indicates, he says, "There's a big problem in our public schools."

So this is what it's come to, folks. Schoolteachers are now publicly shaming boys and girls who read the Bible. Had the kid been reading *Fifty Shades of Grey*, he probably would've been given a gold star.

Author's Note: *I write about stories just like this in my new book, God Less America: Real Stories From the Front Lines of the Attack on Traditional Values. It's available wherever fine books are sold including, Amazon and Barnes & Noble.*

Todd Starnes *is host of Fox News & Commentary, heard on hundreds of radio stations. Sign up for his American Dispatch newsletter, be sure to join his Facebook page, and follow him on Twitter. His latest book is God Less America.*