



ALLIANCE DEFENSE FUND

Defending Our First Liberty

(800) TELL-ADF

MEMORANDUM

DATE: September 14, 2006

RE: Constitutionality of See You at the Pole and student promotion of that event –
potential federal civil rights litigation

The Alliance Defense Fund (“the ADF”) is a legal alliance defending the right to hear and speak the Truth through strategy, training, funding, and litigation. We seek to resolve disputes through education of public officials of the constitutional rights of our clients. When necessary, we may litigate to secure these rights. The ADF has participated in many of the recent court decisions governing students’ religious and free speech rights in public schools, including *Good News Club v. Milford Central School District*, 533 U.S. 98 (2001) (holding that the First Amendment protects student religious speech).

On September 27, 2006, students around the United States will participate in See You at the Pole (SYATP) - a student-organized, student-led gathering at the school flagpole where students will pray for their school, friends, teachers, government, and nation. Our government and courts have spoken: Students have a constitutional right to participate in SYATP through prayer and worship activities.

Furthermore, students have an individual constitutional right to inform their fellow students about the SYATP event as long as they do not materially disrupt the academic process while doing so. In addition, if the school allows individual students or student clubs to advertise events through school bulletin boards, school PA systems, general posting of student flyers, or other means, the school cannot forbid the same means of advertising for the SYATP event. It is our hope that the following discussion will clarify this important area of the law and allow school districts and school officials to avoid needless litigation.

A. RELIGIOUS SPEECH IS PROTECTED UNDER THE FIRST AMENDMENT

It is a fundamental principle of constitutional law that a government body may not suppress or exclude the speech of private parties just because the speech is religious or contains a religious perspective. *Good News Club*, 533 U.S. 98; *Lamb's Chapel v. Ctr. Moriches Union Free Sch. Dist.*, 508 U.S. 384 (1993); *Widmar v. Vincent*, 454 U.S. 263 (1981). This principle cannot be denied without eviscerating the essential First Amendment guarantees of free speech and religious freedom.

It is equally axiomatic that religious speech is protected by the First Amendment and may not be singled out for discrimination. *Good News Club*, 533 U.S. at 108-10; *Widmar*, 454 U.S. at 269

(citing *Heffron v. International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Inc.*, 452 U.S. 640 (1981); *Neimotko v. Maryland*, 340 U.S. 268 (1951); *Saia v. New York*, 334 U.S. 558 (1948)); *see also*, *Rosenberger v. Rector and Visitors of the Univ. of Virginia*, 515 U.S. 819 (1995); *Capitol Square Review and Advisory Bd. v. Pinette*, 515 U.S. 753 (1995); *Board of Educ. of the Westside Community Sch. v. Mergens*, 496 U.S. 226 (1990)). As the Supreme Court has stated:

Our precedent establishes that private religious speech, far from being a First Amendment orphan, is as fully protected under the Free Speech Clause as secular private expression . . . Indeed, in Anglo-American history, at least, government suppression of speech has so commonly been directed *precisely* at religious speech that a free-speech clause without religion would be *Hamlet* without the prince.

Pinette, 515 U.S. at 760.

B. STUDENTS DO NOT ABANDON THEIR CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS OF FREE SPEECH WHEN THEY ATTEND PUBLIC SCHOOL

“It can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate.” *Tinker v. Des Moines Indep. Community Sch. Dist.*, 393 U.S. 503, 506 (1968). The Supreme Court has squarely stated that a student’s free speech rights apply “when [they are] in the cafeteria, or on the playing field, or on the campus during the authorized hours. . . .” *Id.* at 506. This includes prayer: “nothing in the Constitution as interpreted by this Court prohibits any public school student from voluntarily praying at any time before, during, or after the school day.” *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 313 (2000)(emphasis added).

Indeed, in *Daugherty v. Vanguard Charter Academy*, 116 F.Supp.2d 897, 910-911. (W.D. Mich. 2000), a federal district court rejected a legal challenge to SYATP, holding that student prayer at the school flagpole was entirely permissible. *See also Shelton v. Tucker*, 364 U.S. 479, 487 (1967) (“The vigilant protection of constitutional freedoms is nowhere more vital than in the community of American schools.”).

C. TINKER’S “MATERIAL AND SUBSTANTIAL DISRUPTION STANDARD” APPLIES HERE

The Supreme Court has held that student expressive activity - including prayer - cannot be impeded by the public school unless the activity creates a material and substantial disruption to the school’s ability to fulfill its educational goals. *See Tinker*, 393 U.S. at 509. Any attempt to restrict such speech is unconstitutional where there has been “no finding and no showing that engaging [in the activity] would materially and substantially interfere with the requirements of appropriate discipline in the operation of the school.” *Id.* (quoting *Burnside v. Byars*, 363 F.2d 744, 749 (5th Cir. 1966)).

Moreover, the Supreme Court has stated that the standard of “material and substantial disruption” cannot be met merely by the *possibility* of disruption. In the Court’s words, “in our system, undifferentiated fear or apprehension of disturbance is not enough to overcome the right to freedom of expression.” *Id.* at 508.

[I]n our system, state-operated schools may not be enclaves for totalitarianism. School officials do not possess absolute authority over their students. Students in school as well as out of school are persons under our Constitution. They are possessed of fundamental rights which the state must respect, just as they themselves must respect their obligations to the state. In our system, students may not be regarded as closed-circuit recipients of only that which the state chooses to communicate. They may not be confined to the expressions of those sentiments that are officially approved.

Id. at 511 (emphasis added). This fundamental constitutional principle is applicable both inside and outside the classroom. As the *Tinker* Court noted, when a student “is in the cafeteria, or on the playing field, or on the campus during the authorized hours, he may express his opinions[.]” *Id.* at 512-13. The SYATP event usually occurs before the beginning of classes and is designed to avoid any sort of disruption.

D. THE SO-CALLED “SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE” CANNOT JUSTIFY OFFICIAL SUPPRESSION OF THE SYATP EVENT

Schools and school officials often believe (mistakenly) that allowing students to engage in religious speech at school would violate “the separation of church and state” – a doctrine often cited in connection with the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. This very argument has been reviewed and **rejected** by the United States Supreme Court. In *Mergens*, the Supreme Court stated as a general proposition that the students private religious expression within a public school does not present any Establishment Clause problem:

Petitioners’ principal contention is that the [Equal Access] Act has the primary effect of advancing religion. Specifically, petitioners urge that, because the student religious meetings are held under school aegis, and because the state's compulsory attendance laws bring the students together (and thereby provide a ready-made audience for student evangelists), an objective observer in the position of a secondary school student will perceive official school support for such religious meetings. . . . **We disagree.**

Mergens, 496 U.S. at 249-250 (emphasis added).

The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment merely “requires the state to be a neutral in its relations with . . . religious believers and non-believers; it does not require the state to be their adversary.” *Everson v. Board of Educ.*, 330 U.S. 1, 18 (1947). Likewise, “[s]tate power is no more to be used to handicap religions, than it is to favor them.” *Everson*, 330 U.S. at 18. Therefore, the Establishment Clause has no applicability to student speech in the SYATP context. Restricting or banning SYATP because it involves religious prayer and worship violates the constitutional requirement of neutrality. *See, e.g., Hedges v. Wauconda Community Sch. Dist.*, 9 F.3d 1295, 1299 (7th Cir. 1993).

The Supreme Court in *Mergens* explained that a policy of equal access for religious speech conveys a message “of neutrality rather than endorsement; if a State refused to let religious groups use facilities open to others, then it would demonstrate not neutrality but hostility toward religion.” *Mergens*, 496 U.S. at 248. *Accord, Gregoire v. Centennial Sch. Dist.*, 907 F.2d 1366, 1382 n.14 (3d Cir. 1990), *Grace Bible Fellowship, Inc. v. Maine Sch. Admin. Dist.*, 941 F.2d 45, 48 (1st Cir. 1991). *And see, Good News Club*, 533 U.S. at 110-19 (student religious speech does not violate the Establishment Clause).

As Justice O'Connor stated, "there is a crucial difference between **government** speech endorsing religion, which the Establishment Clause forbids, and **private** speech endorsing religion, which the Free Speech and Free Exercise Clauses protect." *Id.* at 250 (emphasis in original). Private student speech can never violate the Establishment Clause. *Id.* See also, *Pinette*, 515 U.S. at 764 (emphasis added). Student SYATP speech is private student speech.

E. STUDENTS MAY DIRECTLY ADVERTISE THE SYATP EVENT TO FELLOW STUDENTS.

Just as the SYATP event itself is protected, so also is student expression advertising the SYATP event. The *Tinker* "material disruption" standard applies to all student oral expression and literature distribution during non-instructional time, regardless of religious content. School officials may not prohibit this expression out of fear that allowing religious speech will offend some members of the community. As the Supreme Court said, "in our system, undifferentiated fear or apprehension of disturbance is not enough to overcome the right to freedom of expression." *Tinker*, 393 U.S. at 508. Where a student wishes to peacefully distribute free literature on school grounds during non-instructional time, there simply is nothing which "might reasonably [lead] school authorities to forecast substantial disruption of or material interference with school activities. . . ." *Id.* at 514. In fact, distribution of literature is inherently less disruptive than spoken expression. *United States v. Kokinda*, 497 U.S. 720, 734 (1990) As the Supreme Court stated, "[o]ne need not ponder the contents of a leaflet or pamphlet in order mechanically to take it out of someone's hand, but one must listen, comprehend, decide and act in order to respond to a solicitation." *Id.* Accord *ISKCON v. Lee*, 505 U.S. 672, 690 (1992).

Several courts have held that the distribution of religious literature by high school students is protected speech under the First Amendment and Fourteenth Amendment. See *Westfield High School L.I.F.E. Club v. City of Westfield*, 249 F. Supp.2d 98, 114 (D. Mass. 2003) ("It is now textbook law" that students carry rights of expression, including the right to distribute literature); *Rivera v. East Otero School District R-1*, 721 F. Supp. 1189 (D. Colo. 1989); *Thompson v. Waynesboro Area School District*, 673 F. Supp. 1379 (M.D. Pa. 1987); *Nelson v. Moline School District No. 40*, 725 F. Supp. 965 (C.D. Ill. 1989). *Hemry v. School Board of Colorado Springs School District 11*, 760 F. Supp. 856 (D. Colo. 1991). Note that in *Hemry*, school officials ultimately conceded that students had the right to distribute the religious material on campus both inside and outside the building. *Hemry v. School Board of Colorado Springs*, No. 90-S-2188, Stipulation for Dismissal (D. Colo. Nov. 12, 1991)(unpublished). Accord *Harden v. School Board of Pinellas County*, No. 90-1544-CIV-T-15A, Consent Decree and Order (M.D. Fla. 1991) (students permitted to distribute religious newspaper on campus). Thus school officials may not prohibit the peaceful dissemination of information by students about the SYATP event.

F. IF THE SCHOOL ALLOWS STUDENTS AND STUDENT CLUBS TO ADVERTISE EVENTS ON SCHOOL BULLETIN BOARDS, PA SYSTEMS, OR OTHER MEANS, THEY MUST ALLOW STUDENTS TO ADVERTISE SYATP IN THE SAME FASHION.

It is also well settled that the government may not discriminate against private religious speech when private secular speech is permitted in the same time, place, and manner. *Good News Club*, 533 U.S. at 111-12 ("[W]e reaffirm our holdings in *Lamb's Chapel* and *Rosenberger* that

speech discussing otherwise permissible subjects cannot be excluded from a limited public forum on the ground that the subject is discussed from a religious viewpoint.”); *Lamb’s Chapel v. Center Moriches Union Free School District*, 508 U.S. 384, 394 (1993); *Widmar*, 454 U.S. 263, 273-276 (1981); *Rosenberger v. Univ. of Virginia*, 515 U.S. 819, 828 (1995) (“In the realm of private speech or expression, government regulation may not favor one speaker over another.”) Again, this principle applies with equal force to religious expression engaged in by students. *See, e.g., Good News Club*, 533 U.S. at 111-12; *and see Hedges*, 9 F. 3d at 1297-1298 (holding unconstitutional a ban on student distribution of religious publications in junior high school where distribution of secular leaflets was permitted); *Good New/Good Sports Club v. Sch. Dist. of City of Ladue*, 28 F. 3d 1501, 1505-1507 (8th Cir. 1994)(ban on religious expression by student club in junior high school is unconstitutional where student secular expression was allowed).

Any possible misperceptions that the school is “endorsing religion” are cured by the school’s ability to require student club posters to contain disclaimers. *Pinette*, 515 U.S. at 769 (“If Ohio is concerned about misperceptions, nothing prevents it from requiring all private displays in the Square to be identified as such.”); *and see id.* at 776 (“the presence of a sign disclaiming government sponsorship or endorsement on the Klan cross, would make the State’s role clear to the community.”) (O’Connor, J., concurring); *id.* at 784 (disclaimer cures confusion over misperceptions of endorsement) (Souter, J., concurring in part and concurring in judgment). The Ninth Circuit has adopted this position in the school context:

[I]t is far better to teach students about the first amendment, about the difference between private and public action, about why we tolerate divergent views. The school's proper response is to educate the audience rather than squelch the speaker. Schools may explain that they do not endorse speech by permitting it.

Hills v. Scottsdale Unified Sch. Dist., 329 F.3d 1044, 1055 (9th Cir. 2003) (quoting *Hedges*, 9 F.3d at 1299-1300) (internal quotations and brackets omitted).

Thus, if the school generally allows students or student clubs to advertise events by posting flyers on school walls or bulletin boards, having announcements read over the school’s PA system, or using some other method, the school cannot prohibit student organizers of SYATP events from advertising in the same way.

CONCLUSION

This annual event is an opportunity for school officials to exemplify constitutional conduct by protecting the right of SYATP participants to properly exercise their First Amendment rights. Any student who believes that their rights to participate in SYATP should promptly call the ADF so that ADF attorneys may review the matter and potentially provide free legal representation to resolve the matter. Please contact our Legal Intake Department toll free at 1-800-TELL-ADF or online at <http://www.alliancedefensefund.org/adfresources/contact/legal.aspx>
