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ACLU of Iowa Issues Letter Guiding Public Schools On Religious Assemblies

Des Moines, Iowa – Troubling reports from parents of public school students in Logan, Iowa, about an in-school assembly have prompted a written advisory to the superintendents of Iowa public schools from the American Civil Liberties Union of Iowa. The advisory cautions superintendents to make sure their district understands and protects the religious freedom of their students.

In March, high school students at Logan-Magnolia were instructed to attend a school-sponsored daytime assembly presented by an outside group, the Todd Becker Foundation. The assembly, which started at 1:00 p.m. during school time, included warnings about drinking alcohol and partying. It included one Biblical quotation. When school adjourned at 2:30 p.m., parents reported, no school officials communicated to students that the assembly was adjourned, or otherwise dismissed the students. Then, in the same room, students were invited up front and told that Mormonism and other religions identified as non-Christian by the speakers were “wrong.” Parents reported that the group also expressly condemned homosexuality.

As the letter states, “Because administrators failed to indicate that the assembly had ended and school was dismissed, parents reported that their children experienced those messages as if they were endorsed by their school, and as part of the educational activities being presented during one continuous school sponsored assembly.”

Well-established federal and state law protect students from school sponsored preaching or religious instruction. Also, Iowa schools must not create an environment that discriminates, bullies, or harasses students on the basis of sexual orientation.

Rita Bettis, ACLU of Iowa legal director, said, “The way this school assembly was conducted reasonably led some parents and students to feel hurt, discriminated against, and that their religious freedom rights under the First Amendment had been violated. While there is no indication that school officials intentionally exposed students to the religious and discriminatory messages at school, students and parents who did not adhere to the same religious beliefs as the presenters felt ostracized on account of their own religious views. What’s more, the message conveyed to some children at school was one of unacceptable discrimination against them on account of their sexual orientation.”

Following complaints by parents, the Iowa Department of Education issued a letter to the Logan-Magnolia Community School District, urging it to, among other things, enact a more robust screening process for outside presenters, clarify for students when messaging from

presenters is part of an in-school assembly or after-school event, and provide district-wide equity training on the importance of respecting all faiths and belief systems. "That's good advice that all schools should follow," Bettis said.

Bettis said the ACLU of Iowa sent the letter to superintendents to coincide with the start of a new school year. The ACLU of Iowa's goals are to shine a light on the Department of Education's advice to Logan-Magnolia; to inform schools, parents, and community members about the experience there; and to ask that schools take appropriate measures to protect the religious freedom rights of students.

A copy of the letter can be viewed at <http://ow.ly/Oa55303O2og>.

For more information about student rights in Iowa schools, view or request your copy of the ACLU of Iowa Student Rights Handbook. Go to <http://www.aclu-ia.org/student-handbook>.

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