



January 22, 2014

VIA U.S. MAIL & EMAIL

U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Educational Opportunities Section, PHB
Washington, D.C. 20530
Email: education@usdoj.gov

Re: Complaint and request for investigation pursuant to Title IV

Dear Enforcement Officer:

The American Civil Liberties Union and the ACLU of Louisiana believe that every student, regardless of race, ancestry, ethnicity, or religion, should feel safe and welcome in our public schools. We know that the Civil Rights Division's Educational Opportunities Section is committed to this same vision. Unfortunately, it appears that the Sabine Parish School District in Sabine Parish, Louisiana, is not. We believe that the School District is in violation of Title IV's anti-discrimination provisions, and we submit this letter of complaint to request that you investigate the School District's compliance with the statute and take whatever corrective action is necessary to restore our clients' civil rights.

Today, the ACLU filed a federal lawsuit in the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Louisiana on behalf of Scott and Sharon Lane and three of their children, who attend Sabine Parish schools. The lawsuit alleges that the School District has violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution by promoting and inculcating Christianity and denigrating the Buddhist faith of Sharon Lane and her son, identified as C.C. in the Complaint (attached to this letter for your review).

The facts underlying the lawsuit also implicate Title IV, however. C.C., a sixth-grade student in the School District, is of Thai descent and is a Buddhist. He has faced overt discrimination and harassment by school officials because he does not share their Christian faith.

In August 2013, C.C. enrolled in the sixth grade at Negreet High School, which serves students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. He quickly became the target of harassment and Christian proselytizing by his teacher, Rita Roark (who is named as a Defendant in the lawsuit). Roark ridiculed him in science class because he was a non-Christian who did not know the answers to improper religious questions she included on

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exams. When a student proclaimed that “anyone who doesn’t believe in God is stupid,” Roark announced her agreement. She has also told her class that Buddhism is “stupid.”

Roark’s harassment caused C.C. to become physically ill. He dreaded attending school and began to vomit in the mornings on the way there. On one occasion, beset with anxiety from the harassment, C.C. told another teacher at lunchtime that his stomach was hurting him. In front of other students, the teacher castigated him for being a “crybaby.”

When Scott and Sharon Lane discovered the full extent of the harassment, they complained to Sabine Parish Superintendent Sara Ebarb (also a Defendant in the lawsuit). Ebarb refused to put a stop to Roark’s conduct or Negreet’s other pervasive and widespread practices promoting Christianity.

Rather, Ebarb added to the harassment and discrimination. She informed the Lanes that they were “in the Bible belt,” and that they would just have to accept the school’s Christian proselytizing and degradation of Buddhism. Invoking C.C.’s ethnicity and race, she then advised them that C.C. should transfer to another district school (Many Junior High School) more than 25 miles away where, in her words, “there are more Asians.”

Ebarb also defended Roark and told the Lanes that, “if they were in a different country,” they would see “that country’s religion everywhere,” and thus “shouldn’t be offended” to “see God here.” She added that, because she did not find it offensive that “the lady who cuts [her] toenails has a statue of Buddha,” the Lanes and their children should not be bothered by Roark’s in-class proselytization and derogatory comments. She then asked whether C.C. really “has to be raised Buddhist” and whether he could “change” his faith.

In the end, provided no other options by Ebarb and deeply concerned about the hostile environment that the School District had created for C.C. at Negreet, the Lanes did transfer him to Many Junior High School. But even there, he continued to suffer harassment because of his Buddhist faith and Thai heritage and continues to be subjected to official Christian religious exercises.


We believe that these facts provide an adequate basis for your office to investigate the Sabine Parish School District and determine whether it is in compliance with Title IV. Our clients have suffered unlawful religious discrimination and harassment in several ways. School officials openly denigrated the Buddhist faith of Sharon Lane and her son, C.C., and in doing so, put substantial pressure on him to change his beliefs. C.C.’s teacher humiliated him in front of his classmates simply because he did not share her

Christian faith and because, in response to her wholly improper exam question demanding a religious affirmation, he wrote his own Buddhist beliefs. Rather than addressing the teacher's outrageous conduct, the Sabine Parish Superintendent suggested that he and his mother should change their faith or that C.C. should transfer to a school 25 miles away with "more Asians."

The harassment and discrimination faced by our clients is undergirded by a widespread and pervasive pattern of constitutional violations: School officials rampantly promote Christianity throughout District schools. They impose Christian prayer on students in class and during school events; they proselytize students and teach Biblical doctrine as fact; and they subject students to Christian iconography and messages. It is hardly surprising that C.C., a student of minority faith, feels like an outcast in this atmosphere. When school officials violate the Constitution in this way, it creates a hostile environment for minority-faith students and is tantamount to discrimination against them because they are unable to enjoy and benefit from school programs in the same way that other students can.

Although our clients have filed a lawsuit in the case, the District's conduct implicating Title IV is systemic, and we believe that your office is well-positioned to identify the extent of the statutory violations and ensure that they are fully remedied so that all students in Sabine Parish are protected. Accordingly, please do not hesitate to contact us for additional information or to discuss this complaint further.

Sincerely,



Daniel Mach, Director

Heather L. Weaver, Senior Staff Attorney

ACLU Program on Freedom of Religion and Belief



Justin Harrison, Legal Director

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