



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on September 17, 2012

Conservatives Target ACLU's "Religious Freedom" Campaign in S.C.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has launched an initiative it claims is aimed at strengthening religious freedoms in South Carolina schools. But conservative legal advocacy groups that have battled the ACLU for years over First Amendment issues argue that the strategy is focused more on barring religious expression. In a press release the ACLU of South Carolina said that its ["Religious Freedom Goes to School"](#) campaign is designed "to protect both the right of free exercise for individuals of every faith and the right to remain free from governmental coercion and promotion of religion." It explained that the initiative is a response to the "growing reports of unconstitutional violations of these fundamental rights in public schools across the state."



SCHOOLS INTOLERANT OF RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION

The ACLU said that over the past two years its South Carolina office has fielded a number of reports of what it claims are violations of the First Amendment's clause supposedly enforcing the separation of church and state. Among the "violations" the groups has found are:

- Teachers praying in classrooms
- The distribution of Bibles to students
- Prayer and Scripture reading at such school functions as graduation ceremonies and athletic events
- "School involvement in the planning and promotion of religious baccalaureate services"
- "Religious content" at school assemblies
- "Coach-organized and coach-led prayer at football practices"
- School board meetings opened with prayer
- Teacher involvement in "student religious clubs"

The ACLU said it hopes its campaign will succeed in uncovering and correcting such egregious violations while "educating schools about their obligation to protect students' rights to religious expression and exercise, as well as the rights of non-believers not to follow any faith."

"It's important that all students know that they're going back to school to a place where they will be welcome no matter what they believe," said Victoria Middleton, a spokeswoman for the ACLU's South Carolina franchise. "We've received too many reports of religious freedom violations, especially complaints that many South Carolina schools continue to impose religion on students."

But groups that have battled the ACLU for years over the rights of Americans to freely express their faith in public argue that the campaign appears to be almost exclusively focused on keeping religious expression out of the schools. "One thing I noticed about the campaign is that there is a heavy focus on



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what the school cannot do and there's less of a focus on what the students can do for their religious rights," noted Erin Leu of the [Liberty Institute](#), a Texas-based conservative legal advocacy group. Chris Gacek of the [Family Research Council](#) told CNSNews.com that while the members of the ACLU claim neutrality on the issue of religious freedom, in practice they appear to want "a state that's secular and opposed to the inclusion of theistic messages." He said that it seems the ACLU's campaign may be "part of an ongoing process in various ways for organizations with left-wing ideologies to exert influence and control ... to gain power over the way schools are administered."

In a [letter to South Carolina school districts](#) announcing its "Religious Freedom" campaign, the ACLU said it would seek to ensure that schools "do not impose or promote religion." Unfortunately, the letter added, "based on complaints received by the ACLU, many school districts are failing" to keep religion out of their schools.

The ACLU letter included a request for school districts to provide information on their policies to keep their schools free from illegal religious practices, as well as the warning that the secular group would target schools it determined were not sufficiently vigilant in sanitizing their learning atmospheres of faith — including the "last resort" of legal action.

But Matt Sharp of [Alliance Defending Freedom](#) (ADF), another organization that defends schools and other groups against the attacks of the ACLU, emphasized that the U.S. Constitution is "the only permission slip students need to exercise their freedom of religion. The ACLU's 'Religious Freedom Goes to School' campaign paints a restrictive picture of the freedoms for students, teachers, and school administrators that the First Amendment protects."

Sharp added that "school districts in South Carolina should be wary of taking advice about religious freedom from an organization that frequently seeks to give that freedom a backseat to their own social and political agenda."

The [ADF followed up](#) the ACLU's missive with its own letter to South Carolina school superintendents, explaining that, contrary to the secular group's warnings, public schools have wide freedom relative to religious expression. "While the ACLU-SC pays lip-service to the First Amendment rights of students to express their religious beliefs at school, they would have schools implement restrictions that trample upon students' rights," reads the ADF letter. "And the ACLU-SC completely ignores the rights of teachers and administrators to express their religious beliefs as well."

In its own intimidating epistle to South Carolina school districts, the ACLU makes much of what it calls the "Anderson Consent Decree." Explains the ADF:

The ACLU-SC warns that if your school district's policies do not align with the consent decree that the ACLU negotiated in its lawsuit against a school district in *Anderson v. Chesterfield County School District*, that you should immediately change them. The truth is that the consent decree does not bind any other school district, nor does it accurately represent the current law on the First Amendment rights of students, teachers, and administrators at school, and school districts have nothing to fear in permitting the free exercise of these rights.

The ADF letter goes on to explain that from the planning and promotion of student-led religious functions at schools, to the distribution of Bibles and religious literature to students, to prayer and Bible reading by students at official school functions, to the freedom of religious expression by teachers and school employees, there are constitutional protections and legal precedents that the ACLU conveniently ignored in its letter.

As for the use of the Bible and other religious texts in the classroom, the ACLU "is simply incorrect when it makes the blanket statement that 'teachers may not cite the Bible or other sacred texts as authority for historical or scientific fact,'" the ADF letter explains. "While a teacher may not use the



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classroom to indoctrinate students, a teacher may disseminate information about religion in an objective manner so long as the information is reasonably related to the curriculum. The Supreme Court recognized that ‘the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities.’”

The ADF letter notes that “many subjects cannot be thoroughly taught without some discussion of religion. For example, in art class, the teacher may overview religious art along with secular art. Sacred texts can be read and studied so long as it is objectively taught along with secular literature.”

The letter adds that “just as objectively teaching about religion is permissible, teaching about a religious holiday is permitted if it is part of a program of education which is presented objectively, and does not have the effect of advancing or inhibiting religion.”

The ADF’s Matthew Sharp said that his group’s letter was meant to give superintendents a clearer understanding of the full extent of the First Amendment guarantees of students and school officials, and to “dispel the inaccurate and incomplete information” of the ACLU’s own letter.

“Public schools are supposed to serve as institutions of learning where free speech is protected,” he said. “They should not be places of indoctrination that are hostile to religion.”

Photo: From the [Alliance Defending Freedom](#) website.



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