



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on December 5, 2012

School Forces First-Grader to Remove “God” From Poem Honoring Her Grandfather

Officials at an elementary school in North Carolina are in hot water with local residents — as well as veterans across America — after they forced a first grader to remove references to God from a poem she had written to honor her grandfather. The student, whose grandfather served in the military during the Vietnam conflict, had expected to read the poem at a Veterans Day ceremony at West Marion Elementary School in McDowell County, North Carolina. In the poem the proud and patriotic little girl included the lines — “He prayed to God for peace, he prayed to God for strength” — to describe the actions of her grandfather during the war. But when a member of the community supposedly complained about the poem’s mention of God and its inclusion in the ceremony, school officials forced the girl to remove the offending lines before presenting it at the Veterans Day observance.



Chris Greene, an employee of McDowell County Schools, told [CBS News](#) that the elementary school “had one parent concerned with the use of the word God in this program. This parent did not want the word God mentioned anywhere in the program.”

Explaining the school’s actions, McDowell County school superintendent Gerri Martin told the [McDowell News](#) that “we wanted to make sure we were upholding the school district’s responsibility of separation of church and state from the Establishment Clause.”

The elementary school principal, Desarae Kirkpatrick, echoed that excuse, saying: “We jointly decided that we must err on the side of caution to prevent from crossing the line on the Establishment Clause of the Constitution.” She added that “as a principal of a public school, I must put aside my personal religious beliefs and follow the law, which upholds that we have freedom of speech and freedom of religion, but that we, as public schools, cannot endorse one single religion over another.”

Ken Paulson of the [First Amendment Center](#), a Washington, D.C.,-based group that studies issues surrounding the Constitution and freedom of speech and religion, told the *McDowell News* that in his opinion, the school was within its rights to censor the girl’s poem for public reading. “Courts have found that religious references at school-sponsored events generally run afoul of the First Amendment,” Paulson said. He added that “when a public school knows there’s going to be a reference to religion then there is a problem and they have to address it. The reason for these restrictions is to prevent the government from endorsing a specific faith or religion. So public schools have to steer clear of religious



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references.”

But Matt Sharp of [Alliance Defending Freedom](#), a conservative legal advocacy group, disagreed. “America’s public schools should encourage, not restrict, the constitutionally protected freedom of students to express their faith,” he said. “Students should not be censored when speaking about their faith or honoring those who valiantly served to protect our freedoms. The poem described the historical actions of her grandfather, and the Constitution protects such student expression at school.”

Upon hearing about the censorship by the school, Sharp went to bat for the young student and her family, [sending a letter](#) to the McDowell County school superintendent and the school’s principal, declaring that “school officials may not suppress or exclude the personal speech of students simply because the speech is religious or contains a religious perspective.”

Sharp pointed out to the officials that the “censorship of this young student’s poem about her grandfather is repugnant to the First Amendment rights of all students and sends an impermissible message of hostility towards religion.” He added that “the First Amendment protects the right of students to discuss their faith — especially when they are discussing a historical event like this student in her poem honoring her grandfather.”

Local residents lined up behind the young poet, with one, Esther Dollarhyde, telling CBS News that “we need to keep in mind what our country was founded on. It was founded on God and Jesus Christ, and our veterans went out and fought for us so we would have a free country. But if we aren’t allowed to honor them the way that the children want to, then America is getting lost.”

Another local resident, Trudy Pascoe, told [Fox News](#): “I am outraged that a school would deny a six-year-old child her First Amendment rights — especially during an assembly to honor our nation’s veterans. It is unacceptable for schools to continue to deny students rights because of their Christian viewpoint.”

During a local school board meeting about the incident, McDowell Schools employee Chris Greene said the girl obviously had no intention of trying to force others to pray, but was simply sharing about her grandfather’s actions. “Let me add here that those prayers worked,” Greene told the school board, “because he went on to serve two tours in Vietnam. My question is this: when do the rights of one outweigh the rights of another? I believe that this little girl’s rights were violated and that those who worked so hard to prepare this program should receive an apology.”



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