



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on November 11, 2019

Florida High School With Animal Rights, LGBT Clubs Won't Allow Pro-life Club

The Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) is going to bat for a Florida high-school student whose request to form a student pro-life club has been unofficially denied for months because of the club's supposedly controversial nature — even as the school recognizes dozens of other clubs with political or religious agendas.

According to a [letter](#) to school officials from ADF legal counsel Michael Ross, on August 8, Gabrielle Gabbard, a student at Gulf Coast High School in Naples, Florida, submitted the necessary documentation to form a student-led pro-life club called Sharks 4 Life, named after the school's athletic teams. The club would be affiliated with Students for Life of America (SFLA), a national organization with over 1,200 affiliates, including 28 in the Sunshine State. Gabbard also named two faculty advisers, Lisa Townsend and Linda Cassidy.

Later that month, Gabbard submitted a flyer for "Club Rush," an event in early September where student clubs can promote themselves and recruit members.

A few days later, she met with Assistant Principal Catherine Crawford-Brown to discuss the delay in approving the club. "Ms. Crawford-Brown stated that the Collier County School district would not approve the club because it was too 'political' and 'controversial,' and that some of the content in the flyer for Club Rush was unacceptable," reads the letter. The flyer, a copy of which was attached to the letter, is about as inoffensive as one could imagine: no images of unborn babies, whether alive or dead, and no inflammatory language — just a simple statement of the club's purpose and a list of upcoming events such as the March for Life.

On September 4, Crawford-Brown again met with Gabbard; this time, Cassidy was in attendance. Crawford-Brown "expressed concern that approving the club would be seen as endorsing their political views," adding that "she did not want either pro-choice or pro-life groups at Gulf Coast," wrote Ross. In addition, Crawford-Brown "made pointed remarks numerous times that if Ms. Cassidy continued to try and be a faculty advisor, she could lose her job."

Cassidy, as a result, chose not to be an advisor for the club; Townsend did likewise after Cassidy informed her of Crawford-Brown's threats. No student club can be approved without a faculty advisor. Since that time, neither Crawford-Brown nor the Collier County Public School Board has responded to





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requests from Gabbard and SFLA, causing Sharks 4 Life to miss Club Rush and be denied access to school facilities and other benefits afforded approved student groups.

ADF contends that the school's failure to recognize Sharks 4 Life is illegal under the federal Equal Access Act, which requires public secondary schools to permit student clubs without regard to the content of their speech. The group notes that Gulf Coast High School already has 78 approved clubs, including the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, the Animal Rights Club, the Gay-Straight Alliance, and Collier Students for Change, which is affiliated with the state Democratic Party.

The First Amendment also prohibits schools from engaging in "viewpoint and content-based discrimination," says ADF. "This failure to approve the club without any justification is also an unconstitutional 'form of prior restraint' on core political speech."

ADF is demanding that (1) the school recognize Sharks 4 Life and treat it like any other student organization; (2) the school "provide written assurance" that faculty members will not be mistreated for advising the club; and (3) the school board update its policies to require both timely consideration of requests to start student clubs and no discrimination against clubs based on the content of their speech.

"Public school officials can't refuse to recognize a student organization for being too 'political' or 'controversial,' especially when they have rightfully approved a whole host of other clubs formed around religious, political, and social interests," Ross said in a [press release](#). "The First Amendment doesn't permit a public school to play favorites when approving student organizations. Gulf Coast High School must recognize Sharks 4 Life, and Collier County Public Schools needs to update its policies so that this doesn't happen again."

Should the schools fail to meet ADF's demands, Ross warned in his letter, "we will have no option but to advise our client of other avenues for vindicating her rights."

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