

# School district settles suit with Tennessee ACLU

December 12, 2011

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) - A Tennessee school district has settled a lawsuit over the proper role of religion in public schools. The Sumner County Board of Education voted Dec 6 to accept an agreement with the American Civil Liberties Union of Tennessee ending a lawsuit filed against school officials May 2.

The ACLU alleged a pattern of unconstitutional religious activity dating back at least five years in the county's schools. Alleged Establishment Clause violations included distributing Bibles in elementary schools, invocations at school board meetings, prayer over loudspeakers led by members of a student Bible club, teacher endorsement of religion and holding graduations and other school events in churches.

Filed on behalf of nine students attending five schools, the lawsuit also objected to busing of students to a Southern Baptist church for activities like a celebration of the completion of comprehensive testing without permission from their parents and allowing a youth minister from the church, Long Hollow Baptist Church, to join students at a middle school for lunch at least once a week.

A ["consent decree"](#) filed in United States District Court for the Middle District of Tennessee agrees that in the future school events would only be held in religious venues if no comparable secular alternative to accommodate them is readily available. School officials are no longer allowed to promote their personal religious views in the classroom, and lunch-room visitors will be limited to family members.

"We are pleased that the Sumner County School Board ultimately

recognized its obligation to ensure the religious freedom of its students by preventing school officials from promoting their personal religious beliefs,” [said](#) George Barrett, cooperating attorney for ACLU of Tennessee.

The school board [said](#) the settlement “fully preserves the constitutional rights of students and teachers and looks forward to the school district’s continued success in its mission of educating students by preparing graduates, engaging minds and developing character.”

David French, senior counsel for the American Center for Law and Justice who represented the school board, said terms of the agreement allow students “the full range of constitutional rights” in areas like forming religious clubs, organizing See You at the Pole prayer events and praying in the end zone after football games.

Regarding teacher rights, French said, the settlement “clarifies the distinction between official and personal conduct” in using taxpayer-funded positions for educational aims.

The settlement marks the third time in three years the Tennessee ACLU has managed to change school policies on religious activities. In 2010, Cheatham County schools agreed to a court order requiring that religious practices at the school halt and in 2008 a federal judge ordered the Wilson County schools to end their endorsement of religion.

*-Bob Allen is managing editor of Associated Baptist Press.*

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