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ACLU: Chesterfield County religious pep rally violates Constitution

By ACLU Press Release and Associated Press

CHESTERFIELD -- The SC chapter of the ACLU has received complaints regarding a serious constitutional violation that occurred at New Heights Middle School in Jefferson, South Carolina, on September 1, 2011. Several local residents have notified the ACLU of South Carolina that the school held a religious assembly for sixth, seventh, and eighth graders featuring an evangelist and a Christian rapper. The school event aimed to convert students to Christianity by encouraging them to accept Jesus Christ into their hearts.

The ACLU of South Carolina calls on the Chesterfield County School District to launch an immediate investigation of this event and to ensure that school officials do not repeat their unlawful activities in the future.

The federal courts have made clear that the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibits public schools from inculcating religion, including promoting religious beliefs or exercise.

As ACLU of SC Legal Director Susan Dunn explained, "It is particularly important that elementary and secondary public schools protect their students' freedom of conscience and leave religious education to the parents."

Schools cannot skirt these constitutional prohibitions by inviting outsiders to proselytize and indoctrinate students, as such school-sponsored activities are equally unlawful, according to Dunn.

The ACLU believes that the religious education of children should be directed primarily by parents, families, and religious communities - and not the public schools. Public schools that disregard this fact and the well-established law in this area often find themselves facing litigation from parents and students who seek to protect their constitutional rights.

The Associated Press released this article Thursday:

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) - A group that supports separation of church and state is complaining that a middle school in Chesterfield County held a Christian-themed rally during the school day.

Annie Laurie Gaylor with the Freedom from Religion Foundation says the rally featured Christian rapper B-SHOC and youth evangelist Christian Chapman and was held at New Heights Middle School in Jefferson on Sept. 1.

Gaylor says the event violates the Constitution and has sent a letter of complaint to the school district.

District spokesman Ken Buck says Superintendent John Williams got the Foundation's complaint in an email, and he was looking into it.

The group wants the district to investigate and instruct schools that such events shouldn't be held. Reports on the rally were posted on the school's website and on YouTube.

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