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Judge rules against prayer banner in Rhode Island school

by Kimberly Winston by Religion News Service

A federal judge ruled Wednesday in favor of a teenage atheist who sought the removal of a prayer banner from her Rhode Island high school.

Attorneys for Jessica Ahlquist, 16, argued that a banner on display in Providence's Cranston High School West's auditorium titled "School Prayer" and addressing "Our Heavenly Father" is a violation of the Constitution and the Supreme Court's 1962 decision banning state-mandated prayer in school.

Lawyers for the school district argued that the banner had hung in the school since the 1960s and was more secular than sacred.

U.S. District Judge Ronald Lagueux disagreed and ruled that the banner should be removed immediately. He also upbraided school officials for holding community meetings about the mural that "at times resembled a religious revival." At one meeting, several school officials read from the Bible or declared their faith. Ahlquist needed a police escort to leave one meeting.

"I am hopeful that this case can be looked back on in the future and encourage others to stand up for their rights as well," Ahlquist said from the Providence office of the American Civil Liberties Union, which represented her.

Ahlquist had to leave Cranston High School West because of threats, but said she is considering a return.

Rob Boston of Americans United for Separation of Church and State hailed the ruling as "a 40-page slam dunk."

Roy Speckhardt, executive director of the American Humanist Association, praised Ahlquist. "She fought for the rights of nonbelievers and religious minorities and is an example for everyone."

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