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Texas cheerleaders fight to keep Bible quotes on football banners

by Kimberly Winston by Religion News Service

Cheerleaders at an East Texas high school are fighting their school district's orders to stop using Bible quotes on their signs at football games.

In August, a school with fewer than 500 students 30 miles north of Beaumont, Texas, began painting Bible verses on large paper signs football players burst through at the beginning of games.

But this week, Kountze Independent School District Superintendent Kevin Weldon called for an end to the banners after consulting with a legal adviser at the Texas Association of School Boards.

"It is not a personal opinion of mine," Weldon told KHOU, a Houston television station. "My personal convictions are that I am a Christian as well. But I'm also a state employee and Kountze ISD representative. And I was advised that such a practice would be in direct violation of United States Supreme Court decisions."

That prompted the cheerleaders and their supporters to launch a Facebook page, which attracted 34,000 members in its first 24 hours -- more than 10 times the population of Kountze.

Parents of at least three cheerleaders have hired an attorney and are considering suing the school district.

Attempts to reach Weldon and other school officials were unsuccessful. But Charles Haynes of the First Amendment Center said the superintendent did the right thing.

"The cheerleading squad is clearly a school-sponsored group representing the school at the football game," he said. "The religious banners, therefore, send a message of school endorsement of religion, even

though it was students holding up the banners for the players to run through."

Simon Brown, a communications associate at Americans United for Separation of Church and State, also commends the superintendent's actions. Writing on AU's website, he said students have a right to pray and read scriptures at school -- as long as they are not imposing their faith on others.

"Clearly, those standards aren't being met here," Brown writes.

Another Texas high school prompted the court case that will likely settle the issue in Kountze. In 2000, the Supreme Court ruled in *Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe* that student-led and student-initiated prayers conducted over a loudspeaker during football games implied school sponsorship of the prayers, and were therefore unconstitutional.

Nine years later, cheerleaders at a Georgia high school who held nearly identical signs to those used in Kountze were also forced to stop, with school officials referring to the Santa Fe case.

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For now, the Kountze cheerleaders and their supporters remain defiant.

"I'm actually thankful for it," Ashton Jennings, a cheerleader, told KHOU. "Because if someone hadn't complained, or if there hadn't been any opposition we wouldn't have this chance to spread God's word in this big of a way."

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