

US school ordered to remove prayer banner

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A US District Court Judge has ruled that a prayer banner located in the auditorium of a Rhode Island High school is unconstitutional and has given the school 10 days to remove it.

The campaign to remove the banner was launched by 16-year-old Jessica Ahlquist who argued that the banner in her high school auditorium titled "School Prayer" and addressing "Our Heavenly Father" was a violation of the constitution and the Supreme Court's 1962 decision banning state-mandated prayer in school. She proceeded with a Facebook campaign to get it removed before working with the American Civil Liberties Union to file suit against the school.

Passing judgment District Court Judge Ronald Lagueux said, "The purpose of the prayer banner was clearly religious in nature," and that "No amount of debate can make the school Prayer anything other than a prayer, and a Christian one at that."

Since launching the campaign Ms Ahlquist has received a deluge of threats and insults, not least from Rhode Island Congressman Paul Palumbo who labelled her an "evil little thing" on a talk radio. School officials and police have also been investigating a number of threats on social media directed at the pupil.

Speaking in court, Judge Lagueux said the "Plaintiff is clearly an articulate and courageous young woman, who took a brave stand, particularly in light of the hostile response she has received from her community."

Following the judgement Ms Ahlquist said: "This country was founded to be a secular country. We are supposed to keep church and state separate so people can have their rights and their freedom to choose. I believe that this lawsuit is a reflection of that."

Jesse Galef, spokesman for the [Secular Student Alliance](#) commented: "Jessica's victory today is a wakeup call to the nation that secular students will not be ignored or mistreated. More and more young Americans are identifying as secular, and we're starting to stand up for our rights. Jessica's example is inspiring others to speak out."

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