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Newton High School Agrees to ACLU of Iowa Demands for Education of Students/Parents Following “Love Trumps Hate” Student Free Speech Incident

Newton, Iowa – The ACLU of Iowa is pleased to announce that it has resolved the case involving a Newton High School transgender student who was belittled and reprimanded after he wrote a political message on his arm.

Last November, a transgender student wrote “love trumps hate” on his arm. His physical education teacher told him to stop writing on himself and also misgendered him by calling him “girl,” even after another student spoke up to remind the teacher that the student was a boy. The student was then taken to the assistant principal’s office, where he was told students shouldn’t discuss politics at school. He was given the option of being sent home for the day or washing off his arm, so he washed it off.

This was a clear violation of the student’s free speech rights at school. The student’s family contacted the ACLU, which in turn sent a demand letter to the school. The school was asked to apologize to the student, to conduct training and education of teachers and student. That training will cover First Amendment rights of students, civil rights protections for transgender students under Iowa law, and providing other information to the student body about their rights at school.

After a period of cooperative negotiation, the school and the family have successfully resolved the matter and hope to look forward to a better school environment for all. Specifically:

- The teacher and assistant principal involved have expressed their regrets to the student about the incident and the harm that it caused.

- The school has agreed to the training sought by the ACLU on behalf of the student. That training to teachers will cover laws on both civil rights protections for transgender students as well as students’ free speech rights at school. That training will happen before the start of the next school year, in approximately August.

- The school will provide printed copies of the [ACLU of Iowa’s student rights booklet](#) to students as they begin their school year, in approximately September, with the goal of counteracting any chilling effect of the incident.

The names of the student and his family are being kept confidential to protect the student’s privacy. The student’s mother’s said she satisfied with the resolution: “We are very proud of our son. We are thankful and encouraged that the school district worked with us to resolve this in the manner they did. We are especially pleased that the school will put better training in place as we head into the next school year.”

Rita Bettis, ACLU of Iowa legal director, said, “We are so honored to have been able to represent this bright young man in standing up for his rights to free speech and non-

discrimination in school, as well as the rights of others. In these times, it is more important than ever that students' free speech and expression rights in public school are protected. In our democracy, dissent is a source of strength, not weakness. We are also pleased that the Newton School District has recognized this importance, and we appreciate its dedication to creating an inclusive and welcoming school environment for our client moving forward."

The Newton student follows the proud tradition of other ACLU of Iowa student clients, Mary Beth and John Tinker and Chris Eckhardt. Back in the 1960s, these Des Moines students, represented by the ACLU, fought for their right to wear black armbands in school. They took their case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, where they won a landmark victory.

The letter was sent to Newton High School on February 24, the 48th anniversary of the ruling in *Tinker v. The Des Moines Schools*. Mary Beth Tinker created a [special video](#) at that time to encourage the Newton student, praising him for making an important impact in his school, community, and state.

To see a copy of the original demand letter, [click here.](#)

To read more about the incident, [click here.](#)

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