

Courts uphold teen's piercing, religious license plates

by [Whitney Jones](#)

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(RNS) Two federal courts have issued strong defenses of religious expression in two separate decisions, one involving a teenager's nose piercing and the other a license plate.

Ariana Iacono, a freshman at Clayton (N.C.) High School, was allowed to return to class on Friday (Oct. 8) after missing more than four weeks of school for wearing a small nose stud that violated the school dress code.

The American Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit on behalf of Iacono, claiming that the school was violating her right to religious freedom as a member of the Church of Body Modification.

"We are thrilled that Ariana can return to her studies," said Nikki Iacono, Ariana's mother, in a statement from the ACLU. "She has missed 22 days of school already this year because the school has wrongfully forced her to choose between her education and our family's religion. Ariana was an honor roll student in middle school, and she is eager to get back to her classes and continue with her education as soon as possible."

The Iacono family belongs to the Church of Body Modification, which believes rituals such as tattoos and piercings are essential to spirituality and connect followers to the divine.

The emergency court order by U.S. District Judge Malcolm J. Howard will allow Iacono to attend school while the lawsuit continues on the constitutional questions raised by her case.

Meanwhile, the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals on Friday reversed a lower court decision that supported a Vermont statute that prohibited religious messages on vanity license plates.

Shawn Byrne of West Rutland applied for a personalized license plate with the letters and numbers "JN36TN" referring to the Bible verse John 3:16. A month later, the DMV denied his application because the message was "deemed to be a combination that refers to deity," according to a statement from the Alliance Defense Fund, which filed suit on behalf of Byrne in 2005.

DMV officials had earlier allowed "GENESIS" and "CREED" on vanity plates as long as they refer to musical groups and not biblical allusions, and "GODDESS" and "BUDDHA" were acceptable as a reference to a nickname.

"Christians shouldn't be censored from expressing their beliefs while others are freely allowed to express theirs," said David Cortman, senior counsel at Alliance Defense Fund. "The 2nd Circuit rightly concluded that it's unconstitutional for the government to decide that car owners can only identify who they are and what they believe on personalized plates if their identity and beliefs are nonreligious."