

ADL criticizes new bullying guidelines

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c. 2012 Religion News Service WASHINGTON (RNS) The Anti-Defamation League is taking issue with a new, broadly supported pamphlet on balancing anti-bullying policies and religious speech in public schools.

The pamphlet, written chiefly by the American Jewish Committee, was released on Tuesday (May 22) with endorsements from groups ranging from the National Association of Evangelicals to the National School Boards Association to the Muslim Public Affairs Council.

On Thursday (May 24), the ADL, a Jewish civil rights group, criticized the pamphlet for suggesting that "bullying erupts in the aftermath of disagreements over political or religious speech." What actually happens most frequently, the ADL said, is "the intentional targeting of an individual with less physical or social standing for physical, verbal, and emotional abuse."

Marc Stern, an attorney with the AJC and the lead author of the pamphlet, acknowledged at its unveiling the rarity of cases involving a clash between students' right to freedom of religious expression and the right to be safe at school. The pamphlet can help prepare school officials should such a case arise, and help them distinguish between bullying and protected religious expression, he said.

But to the ADL, the pamphlet sends mixed messages and contradicts state laws and federal guidelines on bullying by emphasizing students' First Amendment rights over schools' responsibility to provide a safe learning environment for all students, especially those who may be particularly vulnerable to bullying.

The pamphlet, entitled "Harassment, Bullying and Free Expression: Guidelines for Free and Safe Public Schools," was produced by the Washington-based Religious Freedom Education Project/First Amendment Center.