

U.S. judge rules against graduation rites in church: Decision followed three years of student complaints

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A federal judge has ruled that a Connecticut school board's decision to hold graduation ceremonies inside a megachurch was unconstitutional. Commencements for two schools in Enfield—Enfield High School and Enrico Enfermi High School—were to be held at First Cathedral in Bloomfield in late June.

The American Civil Liberties Union joined Americans United for Separation of Church and State to represent two Enfield High School students and their parents who opposed the use of the religious venue. The school board said its decision was a matter of space and price.

“We are pleased that the court has found that holding a public high school graduation ceremony in an overtly religious setting is inappropriate when comparable secular facilities are available,” said Andrew Schneider, the executive director of the ACLU of Connecticut.

Enfield Public Schools previously joined four local schools that agreed not to use the church for graduation. However, the Enfield school system reversed its decision in April after “heavy lobbying from a religious organization,” according to an ACLU press release.

[What the school system and First Cathedral, a Baptist megachurch, seem to have in mind is taking the case to the U.S. Supreme Court, wrote Mark Silk, an expert on religion in public life who teaches at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. “Hard as it may be to believe,” Silk wrote in a June 1 blog on Beliefnet.com, “the Supreme Court has never ruled on whether holding a high school graduation in a church violates the constitutional ban” on government endorsement of religion.]

On May 31 U.S. District Court Judge Janet Hall said the venue would force the school district to “unconstitutionally entangle itself with religion,” especially when school officials promised to cover up religious symbols at the church. One student who filed the official complaint said the religious environment was un comfortable and offensive.

“By requiring a graduating senior— or a parent of one—to enter First Cathedral in order to be able to participate in his or her graduation—or to watch their child graduate—Enfield Public Schools has coerced plaintiffs to support religion,” Hall said.

The decision followed three years of complaints by students at Enfield High School. Last year, 90 percent of the graduating class had voted against graduation at the cathedral, according to a letter to the school board from Americans United and the ACLU. *-Religion News Service*