

French court rules school lunches no longer have to offer pork alternative

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PARIS (RNS) A French court on Thursday (August 13) upheld a local move to stop offering alternatives to pork in school cafeterias, sparking dismay on the part of Muslim leaders and possibly setting a precedent for municipalities elsewhere in the country.

The court found in favor of the mayor of a town in eastern France who announced in March that students would no longer be guaranteed a nonpork option at lunchtime for the coming school year.

“A first victory for secularity,” tweeted the mayor, Gilles Platret of Chalon-sur-Saone, after the court ruling.

But Abdallah Zekri, leader of the French Council of the Muslim Faith, expressed regret.

“I can only condemn this mayor’s decision, which is not taken to bring social peace to schools,” he said in a statement to the Agence France-Presse news agency. “All Muslims respect secularity. Muslims have never asked for halal meat in school cafeterias.”

For her part, education minister Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, who is Muslim, denounced the decision by the court in Dijon for “taking children hostage.”

This is not the first time religion and education have clashed in a country where a 1905 law cemented the separation of church and state. A government ban pushed through a decade ago against Muslim headscarves, Jewish skullcaps, and other “ostentatious” displays of religion in French public schools stirred similar controversy. France has Europe’s largest population of Jews and Muslims.

There was no immediate from Jewish leaders to the latest ruling.

The pork ruling was reportedly based on procedural grounds, and lawyers from the Muslim Council may still appeal it. It addressed a tradition for many years of offering alternatives to pork in public school lunches, along with vegetarian meals.

Platret's ban has earned applause from a variety of fronts, including staunch secularists and conservative politicians. Some local municipalities also complain that offering substitutes for pork is expensive and wasteful.

Beyond cost concerns, the tradition has also tapped simmering anti-immigrant sentiments in France. The far-right National Front party has vowed to enact similar bans against pork substitutes in the 11 towns that it controls.

"We will not accept any religious demands in school meals," National Front leader Marine Le Pen said earlier this year. "There is no reason for religion to enter the public sphere; that's the law."

There may be one clear victor in Thursday's ruling. French pig farmers have been staging angry protests against low pork prices and calling for more action from the government.