

## Alternative Beliefs in School

Krystal Myers was a noteworthy student at Lenoir City High School in east Tennessee for many reasons. As Knoxville's *News Sentinel* reported, she was an honors student, the captain of the swim team, and editor of the *Panther Press*—her high school newspaper; Myers was also an atheist at a predominantly Christian public school.<sup>1</sup> In 2012, a controversy arose when school administrators decided not to allow the *Panther Press* to print an editorial Myers wrote, entitled “No Rights: The Life of an Atheist.”

In this editorial, which was ultimately printed by the *News Sentinel*, Myers wrote, “As a current student in government [...] I have realized that I feel that my rights as an atheist are severely limited when compared to other students who are Christians.”<sup>2</sup> The editorial went on to question the way that atheists are perceived by many Christians, and to criticize school officials for sponsoring sectarian prayer and other religious activity at school events. She writes, “Not only are there multiple clubs featuring the Christian faith, but youth ministers are also allowed to come onto the school campus and hand candy and other food out to Christians and their friends. However, I feel like if an atheist did that, people would not be happy about it. [...] My question is, ‘Why? Why does atheism have such a bad reputation?’ And an even better question: ‘Why do Christians have special rights not allowed to nonbelievers?’ Myers cites a number of other examples of religious activity on campus that she believes amounted to an unconstitutional violation of the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause.

Critics of the Administration’s decision not to print the editorial contend that this is an unjustified restriction of Myers’s freedom of speech. However, school officials felt justified in the censorship, citing the potential for disruption in the school as too great to permit publication. “We have the right to control the content of the school paper if we feel it is in the best interest of the students,” says Schools Director, Wayne Miller.

According to University of Tennessee law professor Glenn Reynolds, as far as the law is concerned, “There’s not much of a free speech issue here because, for better or for worse, the Supreme Court has basically decided, No. 1, that high school students don’t have much in the way of free speech rights on campus, and No. 2, when it comes to press freedom stuff and school newspapers, the school is the publisher of a school newspaper, the only one with the First Amendment rights is the school, not the students who want to write for it.”<sup>3</sup> In the end, students cannot decide what is run in the school paper because school administrators are responsible for what content runs and what repercussions there are from the content. We may ask the question, however, of whether schools have the right to censor students. Critics warn that it is problematic to censor students for material that is not defamatory or otherwise illegal.

### Study Questions:

- (5) Should prayer be allowed at public school meetings and events? Why or why not?
- (6) Should the school be able to censor Krystal Myers’ editorial in the school paper? What role (if any) should students have in deciding what gets printed in a school newspaper? What rights and responsibilities do school officials have regarding this decision?
- (7) Should one religious group enjoy privileges in school denied to other religious groups on the basis of tradition, or on the basis of what is believed by the majority of the school population?
- (8) Are school administrators justified in censoring students when student speech is not otherwise defamatory or illegal?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.knoxnews.com/news/local-news/lenoir-city-high-school-wont-publish-atheist-on>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.knoxnews.com/opinion/columnists/krystal-myers-school-promotes-religion-and-of>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.wbir.com/news/article/207385/2/Lenoir-City-atheist-teen-says-school-wont-publish-her-editorial>