

## **Pro-Abstinence T-Shirts Cause Stir in VA School**

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Staff Writer

(May 9, 2008) Attorneys have come to the defense of several high school students in Virginia who were warned by school officials to stop wearing t-shirts proclaiming the abstinence message “Virginity Rocks!”

Attorneys for The Rutherford Institute have written a letter on behalf of the students to the Superintendent of Albemarle County Public Schools that they could face possible legal action if they do not take steps to ensure that students are permitted to wear “Virginity Rocks” t-shirts without fear of punishment.

“In light of the fact that nearly 26 percent (1 in 4) of American girls aged 14-19 have at least one sexually transmitted disease, I can’t imagine why any school would object to a message that promotes abstinence over potentially risky sexual activity,” said John W. Whitehead, president of The Rutherford Institute, in a May 8 press release.

Whitehead said The Rutherford Institute was asked to intervene after teenagers wearing abstinence t-shirts at both Albemarle High School and Charlottesville High School were allegedly ordered by school officials to change their shirts or turn them inside out.

The censored t-shirts, which proclaim “Virginity Rocks” on the front and “I’m loving my Husband And I haven’t even Met Him! MyLifeMyCall.com” on the back, are part of a campaign developed by Worth Your Wait, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the health and well-being of students in Central Virginia. The goal of the campaign is to empower students to resist negative peer pressure when making decisions about sexual activity and to inform students about the physical risks of having sex. Worth Your Wait provides free t-shirts to any students who identify themselves as abstinent teens.

In his letter to Albemarle County school officials, Whitehead pointed out that the school’s decision to prohibit the abstinence t-shirts contradicts the Commonwealth’s curriculum guidelines for family life education. Whitehead also reminded school officials that in keeping with U.S. Supreme Court jurisprudence, they may only restrict student speech if it would cause a substantial disturbance in the school, invade the rights of others or if it is vulgar, lewd or plainly offensive.

“It is difficult to imagine how the shirts worn by Albemarle students—shirts promoting the message of abstinence for public health purposes—could reasonably be considered to be so disturbing as to produce in school officials a well-founded expectation of disruption,” Whitehead commented.

School officials responded to Whitehead’s letter by saying they recognize and respect that students have a constitutional right to exercise their freedom of speech. However, a student who wishes to remain unnamed out of fear of retaliation by school officials, said that while the

principal did acknowledge the students' right to wear the abstinence t-shirts, other school employees acting in an administrative capacity have nevertheless continued to direct students to cover up the t-shirts.

“This message still has not trickled down to other school employees,” Whitehead said. “All public school staff should be instructed that these students have a constitutional right to wear their abstinence t-shirts.”

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