

STUDENT EXPRESSION UPDATE

“R.I.P. Julius.”

It was a poignant expression of grief over the loss of a friend. Dan Kuhr, a high school student, designed an artistic t-shirt using that time-honored phrase to express his personal sorrow and also to help raise money for the family of his murdered friend, Julius Robinson. Dan’s high school administrators, rather than offering solace and counseling for students like Dan who were suffering, suspended the young man and his friends for wearing the t-shirt to school.

This is just one of many instances in Nebraska where young citizens are learning that when public school students try to stand up for their academic freedom and civil liberties, school administrators are “big” while students and teachers are “little,” as more than one young person said during testimony before the education committee of the Nebraska legislature this year.

Senator Ken Haar introduced LB 898, the Student Expression Act, to reduce incidents of unwarranted and illegal intrusions into the academic freedom and expression rights of students and teachers. On the day of the public hearing on the bill, the education committee’s hearing room was absolutely packed with citizens from all walks of life who came to testify in support of academic freedom for students and teachers, so much so that the committee chair limited speakers to a mere 3 minutes of testimony, and not all supporters were even allowed to speak (ironic, since the issue was support of free speech). All of those in opposition to the bill, who were mostly paid lobbyists for bureaucracies, were permitted to speak.

LB 898 was held in committee during the legislative session and was not heard on the floor of the legislature. Senator Haar remains committed to this issue and has introduced a resolution calling for an interim study of student expression in Nebraska’s public schools. The study will seek information regarding current policies, including curricular guidelines for citizenship education. The study will establish best practices, and will determine if state laws need to be changed to avoid unnecessary and illegal violations of student expression. The interim study is referenced as LR 433. A full copy of the study resolution can be found on the legislature’s website, www.nebraskalegislature.gov.

Interim studies take place when the legislature is not in session. An interim study can be anything from gathering of information by legislative staff to a series of public hearings throughout the state. AFCON will continue to update its member organizations and individual members as we learn more about the interim study. Please continue to check our website and read the AFCON Sentinel for updates.

Thank you to all of the teachers, students, parents, librarians, journalists, advocates and others who have given of your time and talent in support of academic freedom for young people and their teachers.

Note: The person who shot and killed Julius Robinson was convicted of first degree murder and will be sentenced in May. Millard South High School is the defendant in a lawsuit for illegally denying students their civil liberties.