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Poem with Jesus references barred from pageant

CHESAPEAKE, Va. (AP) — School officials refused to let a student read a poem that mentioned Jesus at a recent pageant to keep the program as secular as possible.

Renee Hannas said administrators at G.A. Treacle Elementary School went overboard when they told her 11-year-old son, Andrew, he couldn't read aloud a poem written by her that refers to Jesus and the spirit of Christmas.

The poem links Jesus with the necessity of helping the homeless

Chesapeake school officials cite 'diversity'

and hungry and of instilling values in children to protect them from drugs and violence.

The school's principal, who banned the poem, said she was just following procedures.

"I try to understand other points of view, and I did sit back and think, 'Well, what if I was Jewish? Would I have been offended?'" Mrs. Hannas said. "I don't think so, but I am offended that we can't

mention the real reason for Christmas. . . . Christmas is about Christ."

The principal, Diane G. Martin, said she did not allow the poem to be read because it was submitted at the last minute and could not be approved properly.

"It's never been our policy to use things solicited from parents at the last minute," Ms. Martin said. "I follow procedure, and the proce-

dure would have been to have the program chairperson come to me for any changes to the [program] agenda that was set in August."

Mrs. Hannas' poem, "Christmas in Our Hearts," is a takeoff on Clement Clarke Moore's famous 1823 poem "A Visit From St. Nicholas."

Among the 36 lines are a few explicit references to Jesus or God. One couplet notes that Jesus "did not arrive in a big red sleigh"

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'CHRISTMAS IN OUR HEARTS'

Here is Renee Hannas' poem, "Christmas in Our Hearts," which a school principal in Chesapeake, Va., banned from being read by Mrs. Hannas' son Andrew at a school pageant. The lines are based in part on Clement Clarke Moore's 1823 poem "A Visit From St. Nicholas."

'Twas the month before Christmas when all through the town
The homeless were hungry and wearing a frown
Their stockings were not hung by the chimney with care
For they knew that St. Nick would not find them anywhere

The children nestled in the back of a car
As visions of warmth they felt from afar
While out in the streets a shot could be heard
A young boy fell to the ground not saying a word

Away in an ambulance he rode like a flash
And all because drugs were a part of his past
The moon on the breast of the new fallen snow
Gave luster of mid-day to objects below

The words seemed the same of years long ago
But, oh, the world it had changed don't you know
Our children were no longer safe as before
For drugs and violence were knocking at our door

As you read through the story it seems all gloom and no glory
But there's hope you see, since He came for you and me
No, He did not arrive in a big red sleigh
But in fact in a manger far, far away

Wouldn't it be grand to lend a helping hand
Not just one time of good cheer
But every single day of the year
To have Christmas in our hearts where Jesus never departs

I know it can't always be like in fairy tales and storybooks
But if only we learn to open our hearts and not just our pocketbooks
Our children they desperately need our love and attention
So they'll stay off the streets and look to us for affection

The homeless, the hungry, they all need our care
For we are more fortunate than those in despair
We know not why they live in the streets
Perhaps they just had one too many defeats

So listen my children and you shall hear
By God's word He is very near
So lend out your heart and not just your hand
Let Christmas live every day with peace throughout the land

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but "in a manger far, far away." In another line, the narrator longs "To have Christmas in our hearts where Jesus never departs."

Although there are no citywide policies on celebrating holidays, Christmas celebrations in Chesapeake schools often are called "winter pageants" or "winter festivals" rather than "Christmas celebrations," Chesapeake school spokesman Tom Cupitt said.

Officials avoided using the word "Christmas" in the title of their PTA's "Winter Fantasy" program last week, and they carefully edited out Christian overtones.

"We try to be fair to everybody. Schools are secular," Mr. Cupitt said. "[Administrators] take great pains to reflect the community. We try to teach kids diversity."

In the interest of diversity, the school program had a segment devoted to Kwanzaa, a holiday celebrating African-American cul-

ture, Mr. Cupitt said.

One week before the program, one of Andrew's former teachers suggested the poem to school PTA President Linda Hodge.

Andrew practiced the page-long poem for several days before the show, reciting it over and over at home to his parents.

But on the day of the holiday show, Ms. Hodge apologized to Andrew and explained that the principal did not approve the poem because of its religious references, Andrew said.

"Everybody has a different opinion about what's offensive and what's not," she said. "You just never know. It could be the littlest thing."

Yesterday, Mrs. Hannas said her stance and her stanzas are winning support as word spreads.

"I've had a couple of people call me up today and say they were glad to see someone taking a stand for Christmas and what it really means," Mrs. Hannas said.

• Staff writer Matt Neufeld contributed to this report.