

Civil liberties group requests documents on school assemblies with speaker from Creation Truth Foundation

By Celia Llopis-Jepsen • Topeka Capitol Journal Unsatisfied with a Hugoton superintendent's explanation of school events involving a creationist speaker, a civil liberties group is seeking public records from his district.

Hugoton Unified School District 210 allowed Matt Miles, of the Oklahoma-based Creation Truth Foundation to speak at three school assemblies this week on the topic of dinosaurs.

The ACLU of Kansas and Western Missouri protested, calling the assemblies unconstitutional.

Hugoton superintendent Mark Crawford said the events, which took place Monday and Tuesday, weren't about creationism, and that the ACLU had sought to intimidate the district into canceling them.

Crawford, who was principal of Berryton Elementary in Shawnee Heights USD 450 from 2003 to 2007, said he had a duty to show his students "how to handle a bully." The events with Miles proceeded as planned.

"He helped the kids to think like a paleontologist — how dinos are named, excavated, where they are found," Crawford said of the assemblies.

He said his district had nothing to hide and would fulfill the ACLU's request for records.

The ACLU wants any emails between district staff and employees of the creationist foundation, materials used at the assemblies, agreements between the two parties, and other documents.

In a letter to Crawford, the group calls the events unacceptable and requests the documents to help it "assess the need for litigation."

"Even if Miles never overtly mentions the Bible or creationism," the letter says, "public schools are not permitted to present students with false information, which the legitimate scientific community has universally rejected, as part of an anti-evolution, pro-creationist effort."

The letter also questions Miles' teaching and science credentials.

Crawford said Miles' organization had an impressive assortment of dinosaur skeleton replicas that had provided a learning experience not otherwise available in Hugoton.

"The closest natural history museum is three hours away in Hays," he said.

"On paper, he's not going to stand out to the scientific community. I understand that," Crawford said of Miles' background. "As a communicator, he's excellent."

He said students could choose not to attend the assemblies.

In addition to the assemblies, Miles held evening talks in Hugoton on school property, which Crawford said were about creationism.

The ACLU said it doesn't oppose nonschool-sponsored religious events outside of school hours, as long as teachers don't promote them to students.

Crawford said his staff hadn't done so.

A description of Miles' school events provided by the district to The Topeka Capital-Journal doesn't mention the Creation Truth Foundation. Instead, Miles is listed as a speaker for the Foundation for the Advancement of Childhood Education.

The ACLU says the Foundation for the Advancement of Childhood Education "appears to be nothing more than a front for the Creation Truth Foundation."

Miles' school assemblies are listed on the Creation Truth Foundation calendar on the foundation's website. Both organizations are also in Oklahoma, their websites indicate, and the name of the Creation Truth Foundation founder appears on the home pages of both.