

STUDENTS' RIGHTS

The class is given an assignment to write about the purpose of spring break. A 13 year-old Catholic boy writes that the original purpose was to allow time off to celebrate Easter. His teacher, a Blackwood, New Jersey middle school instructor, objects on the grounds that it is improper to write about religion. If the boy doesn't submit something else, the teacher says, he gets a zero. Upset, the boy's father contacts the Catholic League.

We tell the father about the guidelines set forth by President Clinton on this subject. We also tell him that what the teacher is doing is unconstitutional, and that if the matter isn't resolved quickly, the Catholic League will get involved. He does as requested and the teacher, as well as the vice principal, prove to be very cooperative.

The moral of the story is: guidelines, like laws, are useless unless enforced. But to be used they must first be acknowledged. It cannot be said too strongly that Catholic students in public schools can write, draw or sing about their religion, and they can wear medals and other religious symbols to school. Teachers, of course, are held to a different standard. But Catholic students in public schools have a constitutional right to religious expression, and no teacher or principal can successfully argue otherwise.