

ACLU responds to public schools promoting religious events

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SALT LAKE CITY — The ACLU responded Friday after the Salt Lake City School District advertised a Christmas concert that parents say sent a message that went beyond early holiday cheer.

The group says schools need to be careful about what they advertise to students after parents who went to that concert complained it wasn't just a musical performance.

The brochure and free tickets seemed straightforward enough — a Christmas concert, boasting a world-renowned choir and orchestra.

Tiffany Valentina says her kids brought the brochure and tickets promoting the "Gracias Christmas Cantata" home from school. The school also sent a district-wide email.

They headed to Tuesday's show and found the performance entertaining — until the first two acts were over.

"I thought it was okay that my children know what Christmas imagery means and what it's linked to. It's a beautiful story," she said. "Then they stopped the performance and said, 'We've got the third act for you, but first we have a pastor here who would like to speak to you about how he became free from sin.'"

That's when the performance, she said, turned into proselytizing.

"At that point, my kids were tired and I was not interested in participating," she said. "As we exited the building, they had barricaded all of the exits with huge stacks these books which discussed being 'free from sin.'"

Tiffany says the event asked for donations for the Christian-based nonprofit that organized the concert.

"What was bothersome was the fact that it was not clearly represented as an event intended to disseminate religious materials," she said.

And bothersome, she expressed, that the whole reason they found out about the Christmas Cantata was because a public school promoted it.

"Religious materials and any sort of advertisement really have no place in schools," she said.

The Salt Lake City School District told Fox 13 Thursday they didn't realize the Christmas concert had religious affiliations, and wouldn't have promoted it if they had known.

The ACLU is now pointing out that it boils down to following the establishment clause in the U.S. Constitution.

"Schools, you need to be careful," ACLU senior staff attorney Leah Farrell explained. "It can't end up promoting or favoring a certain religious belief over another or over nonbelief in religion."

While the Salt Lake City School District approved of promoting the Christmas cantata, event organizers told Fox 13 the Granite School District denied their flyer because of district guidelines.

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